DASH EATING PLAN

What is High Blood Pressure?

HEALTHY EATING, PROVEN RESULTS

The DASH eating plan can help you control high blood pressure and achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Every time your heart beats, it pumps blood through vessels, called arteries, to the rest of your body. Your blood pressure is how hard your blood pushes against the walls of the arteries. If your blood flows at higher than normal pressure, you may have high blood pressure, also known as hypertension.

If you have high blood pressure, you aren't alone. High blood pressure affects nearly half of U.S. adults. Many people don't even know they have it, which is why it's so important to have your blood pressure checked at least once a year.

Understanding high blood pressure

Blood pressure rises and falls during the day. But when it stays elevated over time, it's called high blood pressure. It's dangerous because the heart is working too hard, and the force of the blood flow can harm arteries and organs. High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease, which is the leading cause of death in the United States.

High blood pressure often has no warning signs or symptoms. That's why it's called a "silent killer." If uncontrolled, it harms your heart and contributes to kidney disease, stroke, blindness, and dementia.

Managing high blood pressure

Sometimes health care providers prescribe medication to manage high blood pressure, which should be taken as directed. If your blood pressure isn't too high, you may be able to control it entirely by following the DASH eating plan, losing even just a little weight, getting regular physical activity, mindfully managing stress, cutting down on alcohol, and not smoking.

Learn more about high blood pressure at **www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hypertension**.

RISK FACTORS FOR HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

Age: Blood pressure tends to get higher as we get older. Our blood vessels naturally thicken and stiffen over time. But many younger people, including children and teens, develop high blood pressure, too.

Sex: Before age 60, more men than women have high blood pressure. After age 60, more women than men have it.

Genes: High blood pressure often runs in families.

Race or ethnicity: While anyone can have high blood pressure, African Americans tend to get it at a younger age. Among Hispanic adults, people of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Dominican backgrounds are at higher risk.

Lifestyle habits: Eating unhealthy foods, especially those with too much salt, drinking too much alcohol or caffeine, being obese, smoking, and not getting enough exercise can raise blood pressure.

Steps to Lower Your Blood Pressure

1. **Set targets.** Work with your doctor to set blood pressure numbers that are realistic for you.
2. **Take control.** Start the DASH eating plan gradually, set activity goals, and eliminate unhealthy habits.
3. **Work together.** Studies show that you have a better chance of staying motivated when you tackle healthy goals with friends and family.
4. **Change gradually.** You don't have to make big changes all at once. Even small steps make you healthier and get you where you want to go.
5. **Manage stress.** Over time, stress contributes to high blood pressure and other health issues. Practicing mindful meditation for even 10 minutes a day helps relieve stress.

The DASH eating plan along with other lifestyle changes can help you keep your blood pressure in a healthy range—whether you have high blood pressure or you're trying to prevent it.

BLOOD PRESSURE LEVELS FOR ADULTS

Blood pressure is measured in units of millimeters of mercury (mmHg). The readings are always given in pairs, with the upper (systolic) value first, followed by the lower (diastolic) value.

Systolic pressure is the pressure when the ventricles pump blood out of the heart—when the heart beats.

Diastolic pressure is the pressure between heartbeats, when the heart is filling with blood. The diastolic pressure is always lower than the systolic pressure.

Overall blood pressure status is determined by the higher number. For example, if your systolic is in the normal range and your diastolic is in the high range, your overall blood pressure is considered high.

Healthy blood pressure for most adults is usually less than 120/80 mmHg.

High blood pressure is when you have consistent systolic readings of 140 mmHg or higher or diastolic readings of 90 mmHg or higher. Based on research, your doctor may also determine that you have high blood pressure if you consistently have systolic readings of 130 to 139 mmHg or diastolic readings of 80 to 89 mmHg and you have other risk factors for heart or blood vessel disease.

Note that readings above 180/120 mmHg are dangerously high and require immediate medical attention.