

# Introducing high blood pressure



**Blood Pressure  
Association**

the blood pressure charity

# Pressure Points series

Pressure Points is a series of booklets produced by the Blood Pressure Association, to help people with high blood pressure take practical steps to manage their condition. The booklets in the series are:

- 1 Introducing high blood pressure**
- 2 Healthy eating and blood pressure**
- 3 Healthy lifestyle and blood pressure**
- 4 Getting the most from blood pressure medicines**
- 5 Measuring your blood pressure at home**

The Blood Pressure Association is a registered charity and we rely on donations to help us carry out our work. We would be grateful for any donation that you can make towards the cost of producing this booklet. Contact us by telephone (020 8772 4994) or visit our website ([www.bpassoc.org.uk](http://www.bpassoc.org.uk)).

High blood pressure is the **biggest** known cause of disability and premature death in the UK through stroke, heart attack and heart disease. **One in three adults** in the UK **has high blood pressure** and every day 350 people have a preventable stroke or heart attack caused by the condition.

# What is blood pressure?

When your heart beats, it pumps blood round your body to give it the energy and oxygen it needs. As the blood moves it pushes against the sides of the blood vessels. The strength of this pushing is your blood pressure.

Blood pressure is not usually something that you feel or notice. The only way to know what your blood pressure is, is to have it measured.

Blood pressure is measured in 'millimetres of mercury' (mmHg).

When your blood pressure is measured it will be written as two numbers. For example, if your reading is 120/80mmHg, your blood pressure is '120 over 80'.

The table below shows what different readings can mean.



Blood pressure reading	What this means	What you need to do
Less than 120 over 80	Your blood pressure is normal and healthy	Follow a healthy lifestyle to keep your blood pressure at this level
Between 121 over 81 and 139 over 89	Your blood pressure is a little higher than it should be, and you should try to lower it	Make healthy changes to your lifestyle
140 over 90, or higher (over a number of weeks)	You have high blood pressure	Change your lifestyle – see your doctor or nurse and take any medicines they may give you

# What is high blood pressure?

If your reading is consistently 140 over 90, or higher, over a number of weeks you probably have high blood pressure. Your blood pressure may also be high if just one of the numbers is higher than it should be.

High blood pressure usually has no signs or symptoms, so the only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to have yours measured. However, a single high reading does not necessarily mean you have high blood pressure. Many things can affect your blood pressure through the day, so you will need to see that it stays high over time.

## ♥ Why is high blood pressure important?

If your blood pressure is too high, it puts extra strain on your heart and blood vessels. Over time, this extra strain can damage your body's organs, which puts you at risk of health problems.

If you have high blood pressure and do not control it, this raises your risk of a heart attack or stroke.

High blood pressure can also cause heart and kidney disease, and is closely connected to some forms of dementia.



## What causes high blood pressure?

For most people, there may be no single cause for their high blood pressure. We do not know exactly what causes high blood pressure. We do know that your lifestyle can affect your risk of developing it. You are at a higher risk if:

- ♥ you don't eat enough fruit and vegetables;
- ♥ you eat too much salt;
- ♥ you are not active enough;
- ♥ you are overweight;
- ♥ you drink too much alcohol.

Some people may have high blood pressure that is linked to another medical condition, such as kidney problems. For these people, treating the medical problem can lower their blood pressure back to normal.



## Some other things that can affect your blood pressure

**Age:** as you get older, the effects of an unhealthy lifestyle can build up and your blood pressure can increase.

**Ethnic origin:** people from African-Caribbean and South Asian communities are at greater risk than other people of high blood pressure.

**Family history:** you are at greater risk if other members of your family have, or have had, high blood pressure.

# A healthy lifestyle to lower your blood pressure

If your blood pressure is too high, you can make healthy changes to your lifestyle to help bring it down. The following changes to your diet and activity can have a real effect on your blood pressure.

## 1 Eat less salt

Too much salt raises your blood pressure, so it is important to eat as little as possible. Most of the salt you eat is not what you add to your food, but is in prepared foods like bread, breakfast cereals and ready meals.

Don't add salt to food when cooking or at the table. When shopping for food, check the labels and choose low-salt options when you can.

## 2 Eat more fruit and vegetables

Eating more fruit and vegetables helps to lower your blood pressure. Adults should eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. A portion is 80 grams, or roughly the size of your fist.

Try to eat a range of different fruits and vegetables. Dried, frozen and tinned are fine, but watch out for added salt, sugar or fats.



**Please see our other booklets:**

- ♥ **Healthy eating and blood pressure**
- ♥ **Healthy lifestyle and blood pressure**

### 3 Drink less alcohol

If you drink too much alcohol, this will raise your blood pressure over time. The current recommended limits are 21 units of alcohol a week for men, and 14 units a week for women. A unit is roughly half a pint of beer or cider, a small glass of wine, or a single pub measure of spirits.

If you keep to the recommended alcohol limits, this should help keep your blood pressure down.

### 4 Keep to a healthy weight

Losing weight, if you need to, will help lower your blood pressure and reduce your risk of health problems. The best way to lose weight is to choose more low-fat and low-calorie foods, and increase your physical activity.

Set yourself realistic goals. Make small changes in your diet and activity levels that you can keep to for life.

### 5 Get more active

30 minutes of moderate exercise five times a week can keep your heart healthy, and can lower your blood pressure. If you can't find 30 minutes in your day, increasing your activity by even a small amount can help.

Think about how you can be more active in your daily life. Any activity that leaves you feeling warm and slightly out of breath is ideal.



# Medicines for high blood pressure

Changing your diet and being more active can really help you control your blood pressure, but they may not lower it enough on their own. You may need to take medicines to lower it further.

There is a wide range of medicines available for high blood pressure. Most of these are grouped under four main types of medicine:

- ♥ ACE inhibitors
- ♥ Angiotensin receptor blockers
- ♥ Calcium channel blockers
- ♥ Thiazide diuretics

There are other types of medicines available, but these four types are most commonly used today.

Doctors have guidelines to help them decide what to use, but it can take time to find the right medicines for you.

## ♥ Finding the right medicines for you

Every person is different, and some types of medicine work better in different types of people. What works well for a friend or relative may not work so well for you.

Many people find that one medicine alone will not lower their blood pressure enough. Each type of medicine works in different ways in your body, so taking more than one should have more of an effect on your blood pressure.

**Please see our booklet:**  
♥ **Getting the most from  
blood pressure medicines**







Build your medicines into your daily routine – take them at the same time every day, and get into the habit of taking them. This will help you get the most benefit from them.

## ♥ Getting the most from your medicines

High blood pressure cannot be cured, and if you need to take medicines, you will probably need to keep taking them for life. If you stop, your blood pressure will rise back up again.

It is very important to keep taking your medicines, even if you don't feel unwell. By keeping your blood pressure low you are protecting your heart and blood vessels from damage and disease.

## ♥ Working with your doctor or nurse

Your doctor or nurse will want to see you again relatively soon after you start a new medicine. This will be to make sure that it is working well for you, and that you are not feeling any side effects.

If you begin to feel different after you start a new medicine, you can check the list of side effects on the leaflet that comes with it. But it may be more useful to speak to your doctor or nurse, or your pharmacist. They are experts in medicines and can advise you.

If you are having side effects from a medicine, your doctor or nurse can change your dose, or try a different medicine which may work better for you.



# Measuring your blood pressure at home

You might find it helpful to measure your own blood pressure at home between appointments with your doctor or nurse. This can be a really useful way to see what your blood pressure is like in your daily life.

Speak to your doctor or nurse about measuring your blood pressure at home. They may be interested to see what your blood pressure is like when you are away from the clinic.

## ♥ Blood pressure monitors

If you are thinking of measuring your blood pressure at home, it is important to choose the right monitor. Monitors that measure at your upper arm are usually more accurate and consistent.

Whatever monitor you choose, make sure that it has been 'clinically validated'. This means that it has been tested and it gives results that you can trust.



**Please see our booklet:  
♥ Measuring your blood pressure at home**

## ♥ When and how to measure your blood pressure

Ask your doctor or nurse for advice about how often to check your blood pressure. It can be a good idea to check regularly at first, but then less often as you go on.

Try to measure your blood pressure at the same time of day, when your body is relaxed. Try to make sure that you compare 'like with like'.

Measuring at home is not for everyone. If you find that it is making you more anxious about your blood pressure, speak to your doctor or nurse.

## TOM'S STORY

It should have been a routine blood pressure check. We were about to run a blood pressure awareness event and I'd been asked to have mine checked first.

When I had my blood pressure checked, the health advisor looked up at me with a look filled with shock and concern. 'I think you need to see your GP – right now,' she said.



'I had no idea'

Up until that moment I hadn't a clue that anything was wrong. I was 62 years old, I felt fine and I tried to do the things I did when I was 30 years younger. Alright, I was carrying a bit more weight than I should but then who doesn't?

'But I don't feel anything,' I said. 'Yes,' she explained, 'that's why it's called a silent killer.'

## About this booklet

If you have high blood pressure, this booklet is for you. It has been written to give you basic information about blood pressure, and about living with high blood pressure. Areas covered include:

- ♥ **What high blood pressure actually means**
- ♥ **Who gets high blood pressure and why**
- ♥ **Lifestyle changes to lower blood pressure**
- ♥ **Medicines for high blood pressure**

The booklet has been produced by the Information & Support team at the Blood Pressure Association. It was written with help from people who have high blood pressure, and from professionals who are experts in the field. It is intended for people who have high blood pressure, or who are interested in high blood pressure. For more about how we make our information, go to [www.bpassoc.org.uk/AboutUs](http://www.bpassoc.org.uk/AboutUs)

## About the Blood Pressure Association

We are the UK's leading blood pressure charity – lowering the nation's blood pressure to prevent stroke, heart attack and heart disease. High blood pressure can be successfully treated and prevented. We are here to help.

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