

Healthy lifestyle and 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).

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.

A healthy lifestyle to lower your blood pressure

This booklet explains how you can lower your blood pressure by increasing your physical activity and by keeping to a healthy weight.

Regular exercise is very important for the health of your heart, lungs, and blood vessels. It helps to make your heart and blood vessels more flexible and efficient, and it should help lower your blood pressure and keep you fit.

Being overweight puts extra strain on your heart, which raises your blood pressure. Losing weight, if you need to, will help to lower your blood pressure and reduce your risk of other health problems.

Whatever your age, you can probably benefit from being more active and keeping to a healthy weight. A fit and healthy body is not just something younger people need to be concerned with.

This booklet aims to show you how you can take steps towards becoming more fit and healthy. This doesn't need to mean joining a gym or going on a diet. It is about taking sensible steps towards achievable goals.



Is it safe to exercise?

If you have high blood pressure, your doctor or nurse may suggest that you try to take more exercise to lower it. However, you may be worried that exercising will increase your blood pressure to dangerous levels.

It is true that exercise will cause your blood pressure to rise for a short time. However, when you stop exercising, your blood pressure should soon return to normal. The quicker it does this, the fitter you are likely to be.

Most people with high blood pressure should be safe to increase their physical activity levels. However, if your blood pressure is relatively high, your doctor or nurse may prefer to lower it with medicines before starting you on an exercise programme. If your blood pressure is very high, you should not start any new activity.

The table below gives a general idea of what levels you need to be concerned about, but bear in mind that every person is different, and your doctor or nurse may decide differently.

140/90 – 179/99	It should be safe to start increasing your physical activity
180/100 – 199/109	Speak to your doctor or nurse before starting any new activity
200/110 or above	Do not start any new activity – speak to your doctor or nurse

To be safe, it is always a good idea to get advice from your doctor or nurse before you start any new physical activity.



What does and doesn't count

Different kinds of exercise have different effects on your body. If you have high blood pressure, you should try to focus on activities that will help your heart and blood vessels. Aerobic exercise is the type that helps your heart the most.

Aerobic activity is repetitive and rhythmic, and exercises large muscle groups, such as those in your legs, shoulders and arms. Walking, jogging, swimming and digging are all aerobic activities.

Other forms of activity are less helpful. For example, you should not do any activity that is very intensive for short periods of time, such as sprinting or weightlifting. These kinds of exercises will quickly raise your blood pressure, and put unwanted strain on your heart and blood vessels.

Activities such as scuba diving or parachuting can be dangerous if your blood pressure is not under control. You will need a medical certificate from your doctor to start or continue doing them.

The table below gives some ideas of activities that you can and cannot do:

Good for your blood pressure	Not good for your blood pressure*
Cycling	Weight lifting
Brisk walking	Squash
Swimming	Skydiving
Dancing	Sprinting
Mowing the lawn	Scuba diving
Tennis	
Jogging	

*Talk to your doctor or nurse before starting any of these

Building activity into your day

An adult should have 30 minutes of moderate exercise five times a week. Moderate exercise should be enough to make you feel warmer and breathe harder, but you should still be able to talk without panting between words.

It can sometimes be difficult to try to build time into your day for exercise. Also, at the beginning you may find it difficult to keep active for 30 minutes at a time. However, increasing your activity by a small amount can make a real difference.

The main thing is to enjoy being active. If it feels like a punishment, then you're less likely to keep it up. By finding something you like doing, you'll soon see the benefits.

Set yourself small goals that add up. To start, split your 30 minutes into two 15-minute or three 10-minute sessions. This will help you build up your strength as well as helping you get used to your new activity. You can build up to the full 30 minutes over a few weeks.

If you find the idea of exercise boring, try to get other people involved. Ask your family and friends, or even a

work colleague. It can be a lot more enjoyable when other people are with you.



Some ways to get more active

You don't have to join the gym to become more active. If the idea of 'doing exercises' isn't for you, you can think instead about being more active in your day to day life.

In general we are much less active than we used to be. More of us have desk jobs, we use cars and public transport to get around, and we have lots of labour-saving devices in our homes. To start being more active, try some of the following simple steps:

- ♥ Walk more each day, and don't use the car for short journeys.
- ♥ Take the stairs instead of a lift or escalator.
- ♥ Get off the bus one stop earlier.
- ♥ Cycle or walk to work.
- ♥ Take the dog out on longer walks.
- ♥ Take a walk during your lunch hour.
- ♥ Think about activities you used to enjoy, and see if you can take part in them at a local centre.



♥ Activity for people with mobility problems

If you find it difficult to get out and about, then the suggestions above may not be appropriate for you. For people with mobility problems, chair-based exercises can be a way of building more activity into your daily life. These exercises allow you to gently build up your fitness without putting too much strain on your hips, legs or arms.

Check your local library or community centre, or ask your doctor or nurse if they know of any chair-based exercise classes in your area.

Keeping to a healthy weight

If you are overweight, losing weight should help to lower your blood pressure and reduce your risk of health problems. Keeping to a healthy weight is a very important way to keep your heart and blood vessels healthy.

♥ Finding the right weight for you

Your doctor or nurse will be able to advise you about your weight. To do this, they will often use a calculation called the Body Mass Index (BMI), which tells you what weight you should be for your height.

You can calculate your own body mass index. There are a number of BMI calculators on the internet, or you can calculate it yourself. To do this, you need to measure your height in metres and your weight in kilograms:

- ♥ Divide your weight (in kilograms) by your height (in metres)
- ♥ Then divide the result by your height (in metres) again.

What your body mass index means

Less than 18.5	You are underweight
18.5 – 25	You are an ideal weight for your height
25 – 30	You are overweight for your height
30 – 40	You are obese
Over 40	You are very obese

Being your 'ideal weight' will mean that you have the energy to do the things you want to do, and can enjoy a varied diet. The BMI is a useful guide to finding a healthy, comfortable weight for you.

Losing weight sensibly

The best way to keep your weight down is to make small changes in your diet and activity levels that you can keep to for life. In other words, it is more about changing your lifestyle than 'going on a diet'.

The calories in food and drink give your body the energy it needs. If you take in more calories than your body needs, it will store it as fat. And, if you take in fewer calories than your body needs, it will use the fat your body has stored up to make up the difference.

So, to lose weight, you need to increase the amount of energy your body needs by being more active. You also need to reduce the amount of energy you take in by eating less high-calorie food. This is by far the most sensible way to lose weight.

Set yourself realistic goals. Aim to lose around five to 10% of your overall weight over a period of three to six months. A weight loss of between half and one kilogram (one to two pounds) a week is good.



Don't go it alone

It is not always easy losing weight, and you can quickly get bored or give up without encouragement.

Get support from your family and friends, or if you think it might help, you could join a weight-loss group.

Some people find that having support from other people who are also trying to lose weight can help.

Living a healthy lifestyle

If you are not already active, or if you are not a healthy weight, changing to a healthy lifestyle can seem like a daunting prospect. But you don't have to change everything overnight – take things gradually, and build on your successes. Here are some tips from other people with high blood pressure which may help you.

- ♥ 'Don't try everything at once. The best thing to do is find something you can do, and when you're comfortable with that, build in something else.'
- ♥ 'You can find 30 minutes in your day for a quick walk around the park or some other activity. Try to vary your activities so you don't get bored.'
- ♥ 'Take small steps in the right direction. These can add up to big changes over time.'
- ♥ 'Get the right kind of support from your family and friends. Nagging you might not be the best way to get you to change. Think about what would help you the most.'
- ♥ 'Think about what you eat, when you eat it, and why you eat it. If you understand your eating habits this can help you change them.'

It can sometimes be difficult to remember why you are making all the effort. If you measure your own blood pressure at home, you should be able to see the difference your efforts are making to your readings over time.



JOY'S STORY

When Joy Hedgeland was diagnosed with high blood pressure, she decided to fight it by living more healthily. She says:

'I used to go for the occasional walk, and enjoyed gardening, but none of it was regular exercise. My GP gave me a month to lower my blood pressure to an acceptable level, otherwise he would raise my medication dosage.

With family help I reduced my office work and did a bit more exercise.

My blood pressure came down a little. Encouraged by this, I joined a



'I have learned
to like it'

small local gym for two sessions a week. I did not really enjoy the sessions at first – but I did enjoy seeing my blood pressure level gradually decreasing.

This all started some years ago now. During that time, I have found that if I stop regular exercise, my blood pressure increases. I now know that regular activity must be included in my routine and time must be set aside for it.

This regular exercise, plus a low dose of medication keeps me at about 120 over 65. It has been quite a lifestyle change but I have learned to like it.'

About this booklet

This booklet has been written to help you lower your blood pressure by becoming more active and keeping to a healthy weight. It gives you practical tips on how to make healthy changes to your lifestyle, including:

- ♥ **What kinds of activities are good for your blood pressure**
- ♥ **What kinds of activities to avoid**
- ♥ **How to build physical activity into your day**
- ♥ **Sensible approaches to losing weight**

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

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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