HYPERTENSION AND DIET

Patients with hypertension may benefit from changes to their diet. This guide provides information on reducing salt and on the Dietary approaches to stop hypertension (DASH) eating plan.

Hypertension and diet

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is when the blood in your blood vessels flows at high pressure – pushing hard against the vessel walls – over a period of time. If left untreated it can cause serious health problems like heart failure, heart attacks and stroke.

If you have high blood pressure you may have been bombarded with lifestyle and diet tips, which can be overwhelming. But the good news is that it's true! You may well be able to reduce your blood pressure by changing your diet

Dash eating plan

The Dietary approaches to stop hypertension (DASH) eating plan has been specifically designed to treat or prevent high blood pressure, and it's a healthy-eating plan for people with normal blood pressure too. As well as improving blood pressure, it can lower 'bad' cholesterol levels in the blood. That's why DASH is a good choice – high blood pressure and high cholesterol are two major risk factors for heart disease and stroke.

DASH follows heart-healthy guidelines to limit saturated ('bad') fats in your diet. It focuses on increasing your intake of foods rich in nutrients that may lower blood pressure – mainly minerals (like potassium, calcium and magnesium), protein and fibre.

<u>DASH encourages you to eat:</u>

- Whole grains (e.g. brown rice, quinoa and wholewheat pasta).
- Fruits (e.g. berries, apples, oranges and pears).
- Vegetables.
- Low-fat or non-fat dairy.
- Lean meats, fish and chicken.
- Nuts (raw, not roasted or salted), seeds and legumes (e.g. chickpeas, lentils and beans).
- Healthy fats (e.g. extra-virgin olive oil, avocado, nuts and seeds).

<u>DASH encourages you to limit:</u>

- Foods high in salt and processed foods (e.g. ready-to-heat pies, chicken and fish nuggets, sausages, burgers and hot dogs; instant soups, noodles and desserts).
- Foods high in saturated fats (e.g. fatty meats, full-fat dairy and tropical oils such as coconut and palm oils).
- Sweets (e.g. artificial sweeteners, sugar-sweetened beverages and sugar-free sweets).
- Excessive alcohol (no more than one drink a day for women and two a day for men).

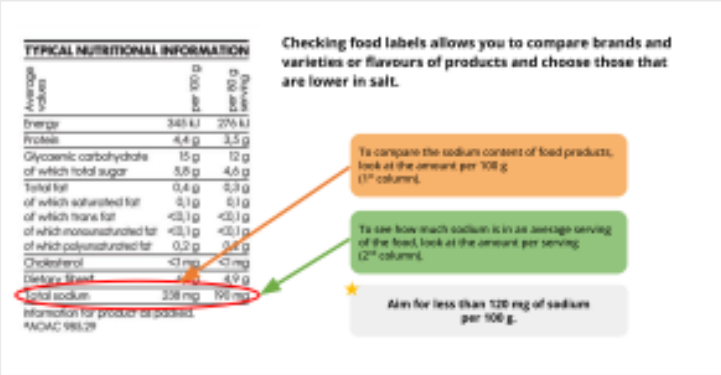
Limiting salt

You may also be able to reduce your blood pressure by cutting back on salt (sodium). The human body needs some sodium to function, but today most of us eat too much salt and this can raise blood pressure.

If you're at risk of high blood pressure, you should limit the sodium in your diet to 1500 mg per day – which is approximately 3 g of salt (two-thirds of a teaspoon).

Much of the salt we eat is from salt added to processed foods like bread, breakfast cereals, cheese and cold meats and in sauces and condiments such as soy sauce. Try to avoid these or look for low-sodium alternatives. You can reduce your salt intake at home by:

- Not adding salt during the preparation of food
- Not having a salt shaker on the table
- Limiting the consumption of salty snacks (e.g. salted nuts, chips, smoked meats and bacon)
- Choosing products with lower sodium content



Understanding food labels allows you to compare the sodium content of your food choices.

Tips for shopping, cooking and eating

- Make a list before you shop – you'll be less tempted by unhealthy options.
- Don't shop when hungry – it makes it harder to resist unhealthy items.
- Buy fresh food.
- Read labels3 and look for the 'heart mark' (see picture), a sign that the food product is a healthier choice.
- Stock up on the DASH staples (e.g. wholegrain products, low-fat dairy, fruit and veg) – you're more likely to cook healthily if you have healthy food in your cupboard!
- Use healthy cooking techniques:
    - Use herbs and spices to add flavour instead of salt.
    - Rinse canned foods (e.g. beans and vegetables) before using, to get rid of any excess salt.
    - Make lower-fat substitutions (e.g. replace full-fat dairy with lower fat alternatives).
    - Cut back on meat – if cooking meals like stews and casseroles replace some of the meat with extra vegetables, brown rice, tofu, bulgur wheat or whole-wheat pasta.
- Add another serving of vegetables at lunch and supper.
- Add more vegetables and beans to your plate instead of meat.
- Add a serving of fruit to your meals and snacks.
- Try to halve the amount of butter/margarine/salad dressing you use – and use low-fat condiments.
- Go meat-free one or two days a week.

Further reading

- NHLBI meal plan
- EatWell meal plan
- Mayo Clinic sample menus
- BBC Good Food top 10 DASH recipes
- Healthline meal plan (scroll down to find it)
- Heart and Stroke Foundation of South Africa
- American Heart Foundation
- British Heart Foundation