

KEEPING HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE (HYPERTENSION) UNDER CONTROL



Exercise and blood pressure

How blood pressure is measured

Your blood pressure is shown as two measurements – an upper (systolic) reading which measures the pressure as your heart contracts to squeeze blood out, and a lower (diastolic) reading which indicates the pressure as your heart relaxes between beats. A healthy blood pressure range is below 120/80mmHg.

How exercise effects blood pressure

Regular exercise makes your heart muscle stronger, meaning it takes less effort for your heart to pump blood around your body. Exercise also increases the ability of your blood vessels to dilate (i.e. increase in diameter) and reduces the stiffness of arteries, thus decreasing the force on your arteries and therefore lowering your blood pressure. This reduces the risk of a blockage and subsequent stroke or heart attack. The average reduction of systolic and diastolic blood pressure with regular moderate aerobic exercise is 10.5mmHg and 7.6mmHg respectively.

Blood pressure also has a direct relationship with body weight, as your weight decreases, so does your blood pressure. Exercise combined with weight loss and positive dietary or lifestyle changes, such as reducing your salt intake or quitting smoking, will have a marked impact on lowering blood pressure.

Besides the benefits of exercise in reducing the risk of developing cardiovascular disease, exercising has also been shown to improve the self-confidence of people with heart problems, as they are able to perform physical tasks and appear less depressed or anxious. Exercise has also shown to reduce the blood pressure of a staggering 75% of individuals with hypertension and reduce the risk of cardiac death by up to a quarter.

Managing high blood pressure

If you are on blood pressure medication, speak to your doctor about exercising and your medication. Studies have suggested that ACE inhibitor, Angiotensin II receptor blocker or calcium channel blocker drugs are the best choice for exercisers with high blood pressure. For some people, getting regular exercise is enough to reduce the need for blood pressure medication, alleviating the cost and any side-effects, and improving quality of life.

Your blood pressure generally increases as you get older, so exercise may help to keep it in the healthy range. The other great thing about exercise and blood pressure is that the benefits appear to be unrelated to gender or age, so anyone can benefit. Aerobic exercise of low to moderate intensity appears to be the most effective exercise regime in reducing hypertension. However, the effects only last as long as you continue to engage in exercise, so regular exercise is the key.