

High blood pressure

Caution! High pressure area

1 out of every 5 Canadian adults has high blood pressure

Over a third of these people don't know they have a problem, because they don't feel sick. Among those who are aware of their condition, close to half of them don't follow any treatment, often because they don't experience any symptoms.

High blood pressure works insidiously until complications arise, complications as serious as a heart attack or stroke.

Fortunately, changes in lifestyle habits and, in certain cases, medication can help control high blood pressure.

The highs and lows of blood pressure

Blood pressure is the pressure exerted by blood on artery walls when it circulates throughout the body.

Blood pressure readings are taken on the arm. It is generally expressed by two numbers, for example 130/85. The first or higher number corresponds to the maximum blood pressure when the heart contracts to push the blood through the arteries (systolic pressure). The lower number corresponds to the minimum pressure present when the heart is at rest between two contractions (diastolic pressure).



We talk of **high blood pressure** when a number of readings give a first number equal to 140 or higher OR a second number equal to 90 or higher.

In certain cases, the physician may decide it is better to aim for a result lower than 140/90 or may consider that a blood pressure reading above these values is acceptable.

One high reading? Don't panic!

Since blood pressure varies for a host of reasons, a single abnormal blood pressure reading doesn't mean you have high blood pressure. It will be necessary to take 3 to 5 readings at different times to check if the blood pressure remains elevated. Your physician will complete his investigation with certain laboratory analyses.

On the edge!

When blood pressure varies between 130/85 and 139/89, there is a risk of developing high blood pressure. Often, medication is not prescribed but the person will be encouraged to change certain lifestyle habits in order to lessen the likelihood of developing high blood pressure.





The causes

The causes of high blood pressure remain elusive. In only 5% to 10% of cases a cause can be clearly identified. In most people with high blood pressure, it seems to depend more on heredity and life-style habits.

The dangers

Over time, high blood pressure can damage the arteries. They harden and lose their elasticity. The heart must work harder to pump blood through them, which may lead to a coronary disease problem in the long run.

By controlling your blood pressure, you reduce the risk of a heart attack by about 15% and the risk of a stroke that can lead to paralysis by 40%. High blood pressure also increases significantly the risks of kidney and eye diseases.



Can you tell when your blood pressure is too high?

Most people with high blood pressure show no signs and experience no symptoms; they can't really tell that their blood pressure is elevated.

Some individuals with high blood pressure may have headaches, flushed cheeks, nosebleeds, dizziness, palpitations, hot flashes, breathlessness, nervousness or fatigue. Because these symptoms can occur for many other reasons, they are not reliable indicators of high blood pressure.

No one can guess his or her blood pressure. There is only one way to find out if you have high blood pressure: have your blood pressure checked.

Higher risk cases

Anyone can suffer from high blood pressure: male or female, young or old, calm or tense. The problem is more frequent with persons who:

- have a family history of high blood pressure
- are over 40 years of age
- are overweight
- drink too much alcohol
- eat too much salt
- have high blood cholesterol
- are diabetic
- smoke
- do little or no physical activity
- take birth control pills
- suffer from kidney or thyroid gland disease

All adults should have their blood pressure checked when they visit their physician. Those at higher risk should be even more careful and get in the habit of having their blood pressure checked at least once a year.

What about low blood pressure?

Generally speaking, low blood pressure is more a sign of good health than a danger. Low blood pressure has a favourable impact on life expectancy. A life insurance company will never increase a premium because an individual has low blood pressure.

Frequently, people with low blood pressure complain of dizziness when they go quickly from a lying to a standing position. To prevent these dizzy spells, just get up more slowly. It should be noted that some medications can cause low blood pressure. When this occurs, the physician can generally rectify the situation by adjusting or changing the medication.

Controlling your blood pressure

By adopting the “4 winning strategies”, limiting the intake of salt and alcohol and learning to manage stress, you can better control your blood pressure.

1 Eat healthy

Cutting down on salt is one of the main dietary recommendations for individuals with high blood pressure. Although this measure does lead to some improvement in most cases, we now know that blood pressure is influenced by overall eating habits.

According to the latest studies, an eating plan called the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) would be especially indicated in the control of high blood pressure, given its high **potassium, magnesium, calcium, fibre** and **protein** content. This diet is based on vegetables and fruit, whole grain cereal products, lower fat milk products, poultry, fish, legumes and nuts. It limits the consumption of red meat, fat and sweets. Just another good reason to invest in variety and quality.

The results are further improved when you limit your intake of salt (*see Cutting back on salt on back page*).

2 Be active 30 min. on most days

We now know that regular physical activity lowers blood pressure in addition to helping with weight control. A good goal is to accumulate at least 30 minutes per day – either in one session or in blocks of 10 to 15 minutes – on most days of the week and all year long!

It is important to choose activities that you like and to be active whenever possible. You can practise a sport or simply walk at a brisk pace, take the stairs, play with the kids, dance, take the bike to the corner store, mow the lawn, etc.

If you have been inactive for a number of years and have high blood pressure, you should consult your physician before considering strenuous physical activity. When you get the green light, start slowly and gradually increase the number of minutes per day, the number of days per week and the level of activity.

4 WINNING STRATEGIES

EAT HEALTHY



BE ACTIVE 30 min.
ON MOST DAYS

MAINTAIN
OR REDUCE
YOUR WEIGHT

DO NOT SMOKE

3 Maintain or reduce your weight

The incidence of high blood pressure is two times higher among overweight individuals. For these individuals, weight loss is a major contributing factor in controlling high blood pressure. It has been observed that as soon as the weight starts coming down, there is an improvement in blood pressure, even before a healthy weight is reached. Weight control also prevents the onset of diabetes, a serious illness that aggravates the dangers associated with high blood pressure.

Losing extra pounds is great, but the real challenge lies in not gaining them back. If diets make it possible to lose weight in the short term, their success rate in the long term is generally disappointing for they rarely deal with the real causes of the weight problem. As a result, once the diet is finished, the extra pounds are quickly regained.

The best way to control weight is to eat a well-balanced diet, limit serving size, eat only when you're hungry and exercise regularly.

4 Do not smoke

Blood pressure begins to increase a few minutes after smoking a cigarette. Nicotine has a direct and immediate effect by constricting arteries. Tobacco also increases the risk of developing atherosclerosis, the accumulation of fat on the lining of blood vessels, which in turn reduces the flow of blood in the arteries.

Obviously, quitting smoking is not easy. There are however many methods and resources to help smokers kick the habit. What's important is to be really determined. Talk with your physician or pharmacist about it. **You only lose when you stop trying!**



I'm taking control

Cutting back on salt

Limit your consumption of foods rich in sodium such as:

- Restaurant food, fast food and ready-to-eat meals
- Smoked or salty meat: bacon, ham, deli, sausages, etc.
- Canned or dehydrated soup, sauce or broth
- Salted crackers, chips or nuts
- etc.

Use salt sparingly in cooking and avoid using the salt shaker at the table. It is a matter of habit: the less salt you use, the less likely you are to crave it.

Bring out the flavour of your foods with herbs, spices, garlic, ginger, pepper or citrus juice and zest.

For a smooth transition

When making changes, it may be tempting to change everything at once. In most cases, your chances of success will be greater if you proceed gradually.

- Focus on one change at a time.
- Set realistic goals.
- Congratulate and reward yourself when you reach your goals and don't feel guilty if things don't always work out perfectly.
- Know how to appreciate the benefits of the changes you have made (taking care of yourself, feeling better, etc.).
- Ask your family and friends for support.

And also...

Limit drinking

Small quantities of alcohol may have a beneficial effect on the heart. Since it may increase blood pressure and reduce the effectiveness of some medication taken to control high blood pressure, it is better that individuals with high blood pressure limit drinking.

Learn to manage stress

Being stressed and having high blood pressure are two different things. You can be a calm person and yet have high blood pressure or be the nervous type and have normal blood pressure. To a person with high blood pressure, learning to manage stress can only be beneficial. Getting to know yourself better, learning to control your anger and anxiety in stressful situations, resolving your conflicts and mastering relaxation techniques could certainly help in controlling high blood pressure.

Should you need medication...

Some people need medication to help control their blood pressure, or the levels of cholesterol, triglycerides or sugar in the blood. If this is your case, it is important to take the medication as prescribed, even if you feel well. If the medication has undesirable side effects, don't stop taking the medication before talking to your physician or pharmacist about it. And don't forget the "4 winning strategies". They can help limit the amount of medication you may need.

WHAT ABOUT NATURAL PRODUCTS?

Always consult your pharmacist or physician before taking natural products. Some products may interact with your medication or have undesirable side effects on your health.

Defeat this silent killer...have your blood pressure checked regularly.

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