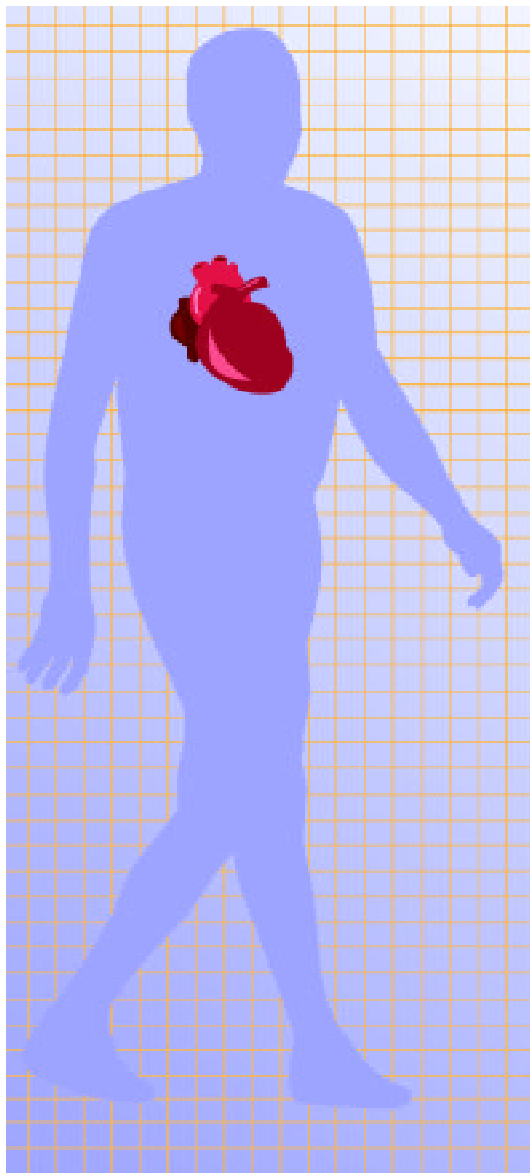




Exercise Your Way to Lower Blood Pressure

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You may think that having high blood pressure means only bad news, but there is actually a lot of good news once you know you have this medical condition.

The Bad News

Let's deal with the bad news first. There are three "bad news" facts about high blood pressure. First, any elevation in blood pressure increases your chance of having a heart attack or a stroke, but this does *not* mean that you will have a heart attack or stroke. Second, there are more than 50 million Americans with this important medical condition, and one out of every two people over age 60 has high blood pressure. Third, many men and women don't even know they have high blood pressure because it has few symptoms, especially in its early stages.

Now on to the Good News

You already know you have high blood pressure and that is an important first step. There are many easy ways to control your blood pressure and decrease your chance of a heart attack or stroke. Death rates from heart attacks and stroke in the United States have decreased by 40-60 percent over the last 20 years, partly because of more effective blood pressure control.

Your Choices

Your choices of treatments to lower your blood pressure and using physical activity as part of your treatment depend on how much your blood pressure is elevated.

If you have markedly elevated blood pressure (either the upper [systolic] value above 180 or the lower [diastolic] value above 110), your treatment should be medications. Once your blood pressure is under control, increased physical activity may decrease your blood pressure further. Increased exercise may also decrease, but usually doesn't eliminate, your need for blood pressure medications. You should talk with your doctor before increasing your physical activity levels to be certain what exercise is right for you.

Most people with high blood pressure have only mild to moderate increases in blood pressure. Three to six months of healthy lifestyle changes — including increased physical exercise, decreased salt intake, and weight loss — are currently recommended as the initial treatment for people with mild to moderate increases in blood pressure. However, you should consult your physician to be sure these recommendations apply to you.

What Can You Expect?

Exercise generally decreases both the systolic and diastolic value by about 10 points. It doesn't take years of exercise to lower your blood pressure — it may even happen as early as three to four weeks after increasing your physical activity levels. Unfortunately for most people, a 10-point drop in blood pressure isn't enough to make their blood pressure normal, but increased levels of physical activity have benefits that go beyond the reduction in blood pressure. Exercise also helps with weight control and improves blood cholesterol and glucose levels so that your risk of having a heart attack or stroke is lower, even if your blood pressure is not reduced to normal levels. Hypertensive individuals who are active and fit have lower death rates than their sedentary and unfit peers.

Being more active is also good for people with high normal blood pressure (systolic pressures of 130 to 139 and diastolic pressures of 80 to 89) and those with normal blood pressure who have a family history of high blood pressure. Such people have a greater chance of developing high blood pressure in the future. Exercising regularly might help prevent blood pressure from ever becoming a medical problem.

How Should You Exercise?

There is no magical exercise that lowers blood pressure. Many activities of daily life will do the trick — walking, taking the stairs, and moderate to vigorous yard or housework, for example. Other activities that are also beneficial can be added to your lifestyle, such as jogging, swimming, cycling, and aerobics, to name a few.

You also don't have to exhaust yourself to lower your blood pressure. In fact, mild exercises, such as walking, may reduce blood pressure just as much or even more than strenuous activities, such as jogging. A simple rule to follow is that the physical activity should elevate your heart rate and breathing somewhat, but you should still be able to carry on a conversation while doing these activities. You should consult your physician prior to engaging in a vigorous exercise program (like jogging), but milder exercise, such as walking, is good for almost everyone's heart health.

You do not have to change your life totally to add the necessary amount of physical activity to your day. A recent statement prepared jointly by the American College of Sports Medicine and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that you should accumulate 30 minutes or more of exercise on most days of the week.

While many blood pressure medications may have negative side effects, the side effects of exercise are generally positive — helping with weight control, and improving glucose and cholesterol levels, and heart function. Injuries may occur when you exercise, but these risks are minimal if you don't overdo it when you start and if you progress slowly.

The Details

Most of us find it difficult to add exercising to our already busy day — even if it will improve our health. However, the physical activity required to lower blood pressure can be added without making major lifestyle changes. Park your car at the far end of the parking lot or in a different lot, so you can “walk” to and from work. During the day, take the stairs rather than the elevator. Skip lunch and take a 10-15 minute walk, or walk to a restaurant with low-fat, low-cholesterol options on its menu. In the evening or on weekends, take your kids or grandkids to the park, the woods, or the beach for a walk. On weekends or when it is too hot, too cold, or too wet, take a 30-minute continuous window-shopping walk around the mall.

If you want to add a half-hour of walking, jogging, cycling, or other activity, get up 30 minutes earlier in the morning and get moving before other things distract you. After a while, most people find that they look forward to their exercise time as a great way to get started in the morning or a pleasant break in their day.

Unfortunately, the blood pressure-lowering effects of exercise are lost shortly after you stop exercising. So you need a plan to keep yourself exercising. Make it enjoyable and interesting.

You can do this by varying the type of exercise — walk one day, swim the next, and take an aerobics class on another day. Or make it a social event by exercising with your friends or spouse. Or vary the time of day when you exercise. Anything you can do to keep yourself exercising is beneficial!

The Bottom Line

The good news is that any amount of physical activity is better than none and even low-intensity physical activities, such as walking, can lower your blood pressure. More exercise will probably not make your blood pressure completely normal may be bad news, but the good news is that the health benefits of exercise for your cardiovascular system are still substantial and definitely worth the effort.



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