

# Optimizing Your Blood Pressure

Okay, this is not the sexiest of articles, but I must say that I am speaking more and more about high blood pressure in my practice. As our country gets bigger (around the waistline) high blood pressure becomes more and more common, and is even seen in children who are overweight. Normal blood pressures for children vary according to age and size, but for adults, “normal” blood pressure is less than 135/85, with pressures over 140/90 being considered “high.” Ideal blood pressure is less than 120/80.

High blood pressure is almost exclusively a problem of developed countries, and is caused by the lifestyle in those countries—dietary habits, obesity, inactivity, stress, and alcohol consumption. Inevitable? No. The good news is that although high blood pressure sometimes runs in families, the majority of the time it can be prevented and even cured by changes in our behavior. I have seen large drops in blood pressure over a span of weeks simply by changing what one eats and drinks and the level of exercise. It is truly amazing.

## So what’s the key to preventing and treating high blood pressure?

Let’s start with diet. I’m sure you’re not surprised to hear that you need to eat more fruits and vegetables. In fact, probably because vegetarians eat more fruits and vegetables, they have lower blood pressure and heart disease than non-vegetarians. If you’re a carnivore or a “flexitarian,” eat the good stuff—organic chicken and turkey and safe fish (refer to my previous articles on detoxification and anti-inflammatory living for more details). In fact, essential fatty acids, found in fatty fish, decrease blood pressure. Raw garlic is also helpful, though you might want to warn those around you. Include mono-unsaturated fats, such as olive oil, and avoid partially hydrogenated oils (typically in packaged cookies, crackers, chips, and vegetable shortening). Decrease added salt and cut down on alcohol, especially alcohol consumed outside of mealtime. Weight loss, even as little as 5-10 pounds, can make a big difference as well.

And exercise? Even moderate exercise, such as walking, is helpful. And it’s most helpful if you exercise for 30-60 minutes most days of the week. Avoid cigarette smoking and, I’m quite serious here, decrease your stress. I am always amazed at how far blood pressure can drop in my office (as much as 20-30 points) simply by deep breathing. People with very high blood pressure can require multiple medications to control their blood pressure. One of my patients with severe high blood pressure came to me on five medications but when he stopped commuting to a stressful job, we were able to decrease his medications to two. Not all of us can leave our job or our family or our neighbors (tempting as it may be at times) but we *can* shift the degree to which those irritations bother us. Your stress level is, to some degree, independent of the circumstances of your life. There are excellent studies showing the effectiveness of meditation, breath work, yoga, tai chi and hypnosis for reduction of blood pressure. These work not only because we are lowering our blood pressure while we are doing them, but because we train our minds to stay calm, and we can access that calm, even in stressful situations. Even when your boss or your teenager is yelling.

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These recommendations are the foundations for achieving and maintaining low blood pressure, but there are some supplements I also recommend when blood pressure is still mildly elevated: Co Q10 (100 mg daily), fish oil (2 grams daily), calcium citrate (800 mg daily) and magnesium (400 mg daily). These all support normal blood pressure. If your blood pressure is still high, please see your physician and take blood pressure medication. Controlling high blood pressure is absolutely essential to preventing heart disease, stroke, dementia, kidney failure, and sexual dysfunction. There are many medications on the market that have few side effects for most people. And I am sure that your friendly doctor would be happy to take you *off* your medication if you decrease your blood pressure naturally by eating smart, exercising, stopping smoking and drinking, and decreasing your stress level. I have had the great pleasure of watching many of my patients “graduate” from medication because of the smart choices that they have made, not just to improve their blood pressure, but to improve their health and vitality.

See you soon at the farmers market!