

Hypertension (high blood pressure)

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is a measure of the pressure your heart creates. As it pumps, it contracts (systolic) and relaxes (diastolic). In adults, systolic pressure is about 120 and diastolic pressure 70, written as 120/70. However, just as there is no "normal" height, there is no "normal" blood pressure.

So what is hypertension?

Hypertension means high blood pressure, i.e. a reading that is higher than considered normal for you. A reading of about 160/90 is usually considered to be high, or even 120/70 in patients with kidney problems.

Who is at risk of having hypertension?

10-20% of UK adults has hypertension. Men are more at risk and it is more common in older adults.

What causes hypertension?

Blood pressure rises when there is increased resistance to the heart pumping. Usually, there is no obvious cause; this is called essential hypertension and seems to run in some families. In less than 1 in 20, there is an underlying cause, such as kidney or adrenal disorders. Temporary hypertension can occur in pregnancy.

Is hypertension dangerous?

Hypertension itself is not dangerous but it makes you more likely to have a heart attack or stroke in the future. In a middle-aged man, for example, each rise of 10mm systolic pressure increases his risk of a heart attack or stroke by 20%.

What are the symptoms?

People with hypertension feel perfectly well. Severe hypertension may cause giddiness, breathlessness, visual problems, or headaches.

What can be done about it?

Lifestyle change is important (see over page), and may be enough to keep your blood pressure at a normal level. Your doctor may also consider drug treatment. You may need to try different sorts and doses before you get the right combination for you. They can include:

- Water tablets (diuretics) - increase the amount of salt that your kidneys remove.
- Beta-blockers - make the heart beat less strongly. Can cause tiredness. Not suitable for asthmatics.
- ACE inhibitors - relax the blood vessels by reducing the amount of a hormone (angiotensin). Side effects are rare, although a kidney blood test is important.
- Calcium antagonists - relax the blood vessels directly. Side effects can include flushing, headaches and swollen ankles.
- Alpha-blockers - relax blood vessels. They may cause a stuffy nose.

What can you do to help yourself?

There are several areas in which you can make changes to help yourself. These are known as lifestyle changes, and should include:

- Lose weight if you are overweight - and cut your fat intake even if you are not. (Advice available from dietician in Renal Clinic)
- Eat less salt - salt influences your blood pressure.
- Eat more potassium - found in fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Take more exercise - try to have a brisk 20-minute walk each day.
- Reduce the stress in your life. Stress does not cause high blood pressure but can aggravate it.
- Stop smoking. (Advice and support available from your GP)
- Reduce your alcohol intake (too less than 3 units/day for women and 4 for men).

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This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

Renal Medicine, Feb 2019

Review due: Feb 2021