Eight Ways to Naturally Lower Blood Pressure
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Introduction

Blood Pressure and Vegetarian Diets, a global meta-analysis published Feb. 24, 2014, in JAMA Internal Medicine, finds a nutrient-packed vegetarian diet can lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart disease.

Background

High blood pressure (hypertension) affects 31 percent of American adults. Elevated blood pressure is rising nearly 30 percent in teens, and by 2025, hypertension will affect 1.56 billion adults worldwide. This is a growing health concern, since hypertension increases the risk for heart attack and stroke, which are the first and third leading causes of death in America.

Here are eight tips to naturally lower blood pressure from Neal Barnard, M.D., president of the nonprofit Physicians Committee, adjunct professor of medicine at the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences, and co-author of the new Blood Pressure and Vegetarian Diets meta-analysis published in JAMA Internal Medicine:

Eight Ways to Lower Blood Pressure

1. **Know Your Numbers.**
   Aim for a total blood pressure less than 120/80 mm Hg.

2. **Choose Plant-Based Foods.**
   Vegetarian diets lower blood pressure by 7/5 mm Hg.

3. **Reduce Salt Intake.**
   Adults should consume no more than 1,500 mg of sodium each day.

4. **Power Up with Potassium.**
   Consume at least 4,700 mg of potassium each day by consuming plenty of fruits and vegetables.

5. **Maintain a Healthy Weight.**
   Maintain a trim waistline. Keep BMI between 18.5 and 24.9. A plant-based diet will help you get there.

6. **Exercise.**
   Participate in at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity each day.

7. **Limit Alcohol Intake.**
   Limit alcohol consumption. Women should consume less than one drink per day (due to breast cancer risk), men no more than two.

8. **Avoid Tobacco.**
   Smoking doubles your risk for heart disease.
Eight Ways to Naturally Lower Blood Pressure

1. Know Your Numbers
Aim for a total blood pressure less than 120/80 mm Hg.

Systolic blood pressure is the top blood pressure number, which measures the pressure in the arteries when your heart beats. Aim for systolic blood pressure less than 120 mm Hg (millimeters of mercury). A systolic blood pressure higher than 120 mm Hg indicates your heart is working overtime to pump blood through your blood vessels, which exerts maximum pressure on your arteries.

Diastolic blood pressure is the bottom blood pressure number, which measures the pressure in the arteries when your heart is at rest between beats. Aim for diastolic blood pressure less than 80 mm Hg. A diastolic blood pressure reading above 80 mm Hg indicates your heart is working harder than necessary to fill your left-ventricular heart chamber with blood. Over time this can lead to congestive heart failure.

Prehypertension starts at 120/80 mm Hg and hypertension starts at 140/90 mm Hg:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>SBP</th>
<th>DBP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>&lt;120</td>
<td>and &lt;80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prehypertension</td>
<td>120-139</td>
<td>or 80-89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1 Hypertension</td>
<td>140-159</td>
<td>or 90-99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 Hypertension</td>
<td>&gt;160</td>
<td>or &gt;100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To gauge your blood pressure, stop by your physician’s office or local pharmacy. A health care provider will use three tests to ensure accuracy. If you have or are at risk for hypertension, talk to your physician about a home blood pressure monitoring device.

Blood Pressure Fact: An increase of 20/10 mm Hg, starting at 115/75 mm Hg, doubles the risk of cardiovascular disease.

2. Choose Plant-Based Foods.
Vegetarian diets are associated with low blood pressure.

New research published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* shows adults who follow a vegetarian diet have a blood pressure 7/5 mm Hg lower than adults who consume a diet including meat. Changing the way you eat to favor fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes can bring your blood pressure down and reduce need for antihypertensive medications. Based on clinical trials, people who make dietary changes can expect to see lower blood pressure, an average drop of 5/2 mm Hg, in just six weeks.

Include more of the following foods in your diet:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whole Grains</th>
<th>Brown Rice, Whole-Wheat Bread or Pasta, Oatmeal, Millet, Barley, Buckwheat Groats, Quinoa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beans/legumes</td>
<td>Black-Eyed Peas, Kidney Beans, Pinto Beans, Lentils, Navy Beans, Chickpeas, Tofu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>Fresh or Frozen Broccoli, Collard Greens, Kale, Spinach, Carrots, Potatoes, Tomatoes, Squash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruits</td>
<td>Bananas, Oranges, Apples, Pears, Grapefruit, Strawberries, Mango, Papaya, Guava, Blueberries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eight Ways to Naturally Lower Blood Pressure

Blood Pressure Fact: When you avoid animal fats and added oils, your blood becomes less viscous—that is, it’s less “thick.” It becomes more like water and less like grease, and that means it flows more easily through your arteries. Your heart no longer has to push as hard to keep your blood moving. Plant-based foods are naturally rich in potassium and low in sodium, fat, and cholesterol.

3. Reduce Salt Intake.
Adults should consume less than 1,500 mg of sodium each day.

Instead of adding salt to recipes, try experimenting with spices and herbs, such as cinnamon, pepper, curry powder, and cilantro. On the go? Become savvy at reading nutrition labels. Packaged meals, snacks, and salt-added canned goods can easily supply a day’s worth of sodium in just one serving. In addition to wreaking havoc on your heart, a diet rich in sodium can take a toll on your kidneys and disrupt calcium balance, increasing the risk for osteoporosis.

Here’s how to decipher sodium content in food labels:

- **Low Sodium**: contains 140 mg or less sodium per serving.
- **Very Low Sodium**: contains 35 mg of less sodium per serving.
- **Sodium Free**: contains less than 5 mg of sodium per serving.

Excess sodium consumption over time can increase the risk of a heart attack or stroke.

4. Power Up With Potassium.
Aim for 4,700 mg of potassium each day.

Your kidneys use potassium and sodium to balance blood flow in your body. By opting for foods low in sodium and rich in potassium, your blood pressure will naturally fall. Adults should aim for 4,700 mg of potassium each day. Especially good sources include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tomatoes or Tomato Products</th>
<th>One Cup of Tomato Paste</th>
<th>2,657 mg potassium</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raisins or Figs</td>
<td>1/4 Cup of Raisins (a small handful)</td>
<td>1,021 mg potassium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Vegetables</td>
<td>One Cup of Bok Choy</td>
<td>631 mg potassium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lentils and Beans</td>
<td>One Cup of Lentil Soup</td>
<td>590 mg potassium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange Fruits and Vegetables</td>
<td>One Cup of Butternut Squash</td>
<td>474 mg potassium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bananas</td>
<td>One Medium Banana</td>
<td>422 mg potassium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Blood Pressure Fact: Researchers from the Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults (CARDIA) study find study participants who consume the most plant foods reduce their risk of developing hypertension by 36 percent.

5. Maintain a Healthy Weight.
Maintain a trim waistline and BMI between 18.5 and 24.9.

Excess weight can take a toll on your heart. The good news is losing even 10 pounds can lower blood pressure. People who maintain a healthy
Eight Ways to Naturally Lower Blood Pressure

weight reduce risk for type 2 diabetes, heart problems, joint problems, and some forms of cancer.¹¹

Your body mass index (BMI) is a measure of your weight that is adjusted for your height and is used to assess health risk. You can use a variety of online calculators, including the simple tool at NutritionMD.org. A healthful BMI falls in the range of 18.5 and 24.9.¹²

After you assess your BMI, measure your waistline. A waist circumference greater than 40 inches for men and 35 inches for nonpregnant women is linked to increased risk for high blood pressure. To measure your waist circumference, place a flexible measuring tape around your bare abdomen just above your hip bone. The tape should be snug but not tight. Exhale before measuring.

Blood Pressure Fact: A healthful plant-based diet causes easy weight loss, and losing excess weight can help lower blood pressure by 5 to 20 mm Hg.

Get at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity each day.

Exercise can help bring your weight and blood pressure down. All you need is a 30-minute brisk walk each day. Sixty minutes of aerobic exercise—swimming, biking, or kickboxing—three times a week counts, too. Maintain a regular exercise program and expect to see lower blood pressure in just one to three months.¹⁴,¹⁵

Blood Pressure Fact: Becoming more active helps lower blood pressure by 4 to 9 mm Hg.¹³

7. Limit Alcohol Use.
Women should consume less than one drink per day (due to breast cancer risk), men no more than two.

Alcohol can cause a sudden rise in blood pressure. Women should consume less than one alcoholic beverage per day (daily alcohol use increases breast cancer risk),¹⁶ and men should limit themselves to no more than two drinks.¹⁷ An alcoholic beverage is 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled liquor.

Blood Pressure Fact: The National Heart, Blood, and Lung Institute finds modifying alcohol consumption can lower systolic blood pressure by an average of 2 to 4 mm Hg.¹³

8. Avoid Tobacco.
There are many good reasons to quit smoking and healthier arteries is one.

Each cigarette immediately raises blood pressure and damages the arteries. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finds people who smoke have twice the risk for coronary heart disease and stroke, compared to nonsmokers.¹⁸

Blood Pressure Fact: Quit smoking for someone you love. Secondhand smoke increases heart disease risk by 25 to 30 percent.¹⁸
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References:


