

High blood pressure (hypertension)

Is known as the 'silent killer' as there are rarely visible symptoms warning you that your blood pressure is high. In more advanced cases headaches, visual disturbances, nosebleeds, nausea and vomiting, sleepiness and even seizures may be experienced.

Two out of three people with high blood pressure are unaware of the condition.

It is estimated that **1 in 4 South Africans** between the ages of 15 and 64 years suffers from high blood pressure. It is one of the leading causes of heart attacks, strokes, kidney failure and premature death.

What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the pressure of the blood in your arteries that is needed to keep blood flowing through your body. High blood pressure develops if the walls of the larger arteries lose their natural elasticity and become rigid, and the smaller blood vessels become narrower.

A blood pressure measurement is made up of two parts: systolic and diastolic. Systolic pressure (SBP) occurs in arteries during heart contraction and diastolic pressure (DBP) during the period of heart relaxation between beats. This is why a measurement is expressed as one figure "over" another, for example, 140/90 mm Hg (SBP/DBP).

A guide of blood pressure levels:

Normal	<120/80 to 129/84
High Normal	130/85 to 139/89
Hypertension - mild - moderate - severe	140/90 to 159/99 160/100 to 179/109 > 180/110

Have your blood pressure checked once a year (more often if there is a history).

Risk factors for high blood pressure:

- A family history of high blood pressure.
- Ethnic groups: the black African population has a greater predisposition to hypertension.
- Age: the risk of developing high blood pressure increases with age (it occurs most often in men over the age of 35 years).
- Being overweight (especially around the stomach area) contributes to a 2-6 times higher risk.
- An unhealthy diet, including a high salt intake.
- Excessive alcohol consumption.
- Physical inactivity.
- Smoking.
- Stress.
- Pregnancy.
- Certain medications like birth control pills, steroids and anti-inflammatory drugs.
- Severe kidney disease.

What harm does high blood pressure do?

An uncontrolled, high blood pressure can lead to a heart attack or stroke, kidney failure and damage to eyesight (glaucoma, blindness). The increased workload can also make the heart become too weak, less efficient and eventually lead to heart failure. Tiredness, shortness of breath and swollen ankles are often experienced.

How can I decrease my blood pressure level?

- Eat small, regular meals every day
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet. Tips:
 - Enjoy a variety of fruits and vegetables (at least 5 servings a day)
 - Include foods that are high in fibre (e.g. whole grains and nuts)

- Avoid fatty foods, especially those that are high in saturated fats (e.g. full cream dairy products, meat, chicken skin and fried foods)
- Eat foods that are low in refined carbohydrates (limit food and drinks high in added sugars).
- Choose Heart Mark products when shopping or eating out as these are healthier alternatives.
- Overweight people are advised to lose weight. Losing as little as 5-10% of your total body weight can lead to a meaningful drop in blood pressure.
- Limit total salt (sodium chloride) intake to one teaspoon (6g) per day.
- If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation. Limit daily intake to 1 drink per day in women and 2 drinks per day in men.
- Caffeine in coffee, tea, cola drinks, chocolate, energy drinks and weight loss products may cause blood pressure to increase temporarily.
- Include regular physical activity as part of your daily routine (aim for at 30 minutes 5 times a week).

Take all blood pressure medication exactly as prescribed. Don't stop or change it unless advised to do so by your doctor.

Practical tips for reducing salt intake

Some foods that you'd never guess contain salt. The best way to determine this is by comparing products before purchasing them.

- Avoid products containing salt - look out for the word "sodium" in the ingredients list (e.g. sodium chloride (table salt), monosodium glutamate and sodium bicarbonate (baking soda).

- Always choose "low salt" or "no added salt" alternatives if there are any available.
- Choose fresh foods regularly.
- Cut down on processed foods that contain a lot of salt (packet/canned soups, stock cubes, packaged gravies/cook-in sauces, smoked/cured foods, processed meats, convenience foods, canned products, salty savoury snacks, salty sandwich spreads).
- Cook without using salt. Learn to use alternatives such as pepper, salt free spices, vinegar, lemon juice, fresh garlic, freshly ground horseradish, hot pepper sauce, garlic and onion powders, fruit and fruit juices, low-sodium commercial salad dressings and home-made salad dressings without added salt for added flavour.
- Avoid adding salt to your food at the table.
- Limit the use of bottled sauces (e.g. Worcestershire, soya or tomato sauce) or choose low salt varieties.
- Sodium-free substitutes for table salt (NaCl) contain mostly potassium chloride (KCl), which has a similar taste and appearance. Persons who are suffering from kidney or heart failure should seek medical advice before using KCl varieties

This is one in a series of brochures. For the full series and more heart smart information call the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222 or visit www.heartfoundation.co.za