

Diet and lifestyle changes can reduce your dependence on blood pressure medications

Written by meg sibal, m.d.
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WHILE high blood pressure can be stubborn — three to five medications are often needed to bring it down — the good news is that making simple changes to your everyday life may help reduce your dependence on drugs, says the June 2013 issue of the Harvard Medical School's *Harvard Heart Letter*

The heart letter makes the following recommendations on diet and lifestyle interventions which may help reduce your dependence on blood pressure medications:

- Eat a healthy diet - This consists of a colorful diet high in red, green, yellow, orange and purple foods, and low in salt, carbohydrates and fats, says Dr. Randall Zusman, a blood pressure specialist at Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital.

Increase potassium intake, particularly if you take a diuretic - fortunately, many colorful foods are high in potassium, he adds.

- Limit your salt intake - Two important rules to follow:

- 1) Never add salt to your food and

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2) Avoid foods that are high in salt - this includes most canned, bottled, or bagged foods, lunch meats, fast foods, breads and many cereals.

“Stick with fresh foods. At the grocery store, I recommend people start in the produce section, then go to uncooked meats and chicken, then to the dairy aisle, then to the checkout,” says Dr. Zusman.

- Nibble on chocolate - Researchers at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women’s Hospital found that a bite or two a day of dark chocolate can cause a small drop in blood pressure - just make sure the chocolate has a cocoa content of 70% or higher.

However, remember that a little chocolate is good, but a lot may lead to diabetes and obesity.

- Drink responsibly - Limit your alcohol intake to two drinks a day if you’re a man, one drink if you’re a woman.

Studies show that individuals who drink this amount tend to have lower blood pressure than those who do not drink at all.

However, drinking more than the recommended amount may cause your blood pressure to rise.

- Exercise regularly - Exercises that put the body in motion, such as walking, can lower blood pressure provided they are done daily.

While weight lifting can temporarily raise blood pressure, lifting light weights can lower cholesterol and blood pressure.

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For muscle toning, doing multiple repetitions with 5- to 10-pound weights is advised.

How much your blood pressure is likely to drop depends on how much exercise you do, says the heart letter.

Dr. Zusman recommends: "Exercise to the extent you are able. More exercise is better than some, and some is better than none."

- Slim down - No one really knows why being overweight tends to boost blood pressure, but overweight individuals who lose weight usually find their blood pressure drops along with the pounds.
- Stay away from smoke - Individuals with high blood pressure should avoid smoking, as well as secondhand smoke.

Cells in the lining of blood vessels produce a substance that lowers blood pressure - exposure to smoke can damage these cells, causing blood pressure to rise.

- Relax - Elevated blood pressure is a natural response to stress - thus, invoking the relaxation response can counteract this effect, explains the heart letter.

Relaxation techniques help individuals learn how to use their mind to control their blood pressure, heart rate, breathing rate and muscle tension (see <http://health.harvard.edu/relax> for instruction).

Dr. Zusman says, "It puts you in control, it's free, there's no gym to join or equipment to buy, and you can do it at any age."

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A large randomized, controlled, NIH-funded trial of acupuncture in people with high blood pressure which was conducted by Dr. Zusman and colleagues found that one-third of those who received the sham treatment (needles inserted randomly under the skin) responded favorably, as did one-third of those who received true acupuncture.

“Acupuncture works for pain, headaches, muscle spasms and infertility, but we could not demonstrate a clear benefit for high blood pressure. Therefore, I don’t recommend it for the treatment of high blood pressure,” says Dr. Zusman.

In conclusion, Dr. Zusman feels the above-mentioned recommendations are good for your general health, whether the blood pressure drops a little or a lot, or even, if it doesn’t change at all.