

EXERCISE

A Drug-Free Approach to Lowering Blood Pressure

Having high blood pressure and not getting enough exercise are closely related. Discover how small changes in your daily routine can make a big difference.

How exercise can lower your blood pressure

Regular activity makes your heart stronger. A stronger heart can pump more blood with less effort. If your heart can work less to pump blood the force on your arteries decreases, lowering your blood pressure. Additionally, being more physically active can lower your systolic blood pressure—this is the top number when reading your BP—by an average of 5-10 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg). That is as good as some blood pressure medications. You must maintain a healthy lifestyle of physical activity to keep your blood pressure low. It takes about one to three months for regular exercise to have an impact on your blood pressure.

If your blood pressure is at a desirable level — less than 120/80 mm Hg — exercise can keep it from rising as you age. Regular exercise also helps you maintain a healthy weight, another important way to control blood pressure.

How much exercise do you need?

Cardiovascular/aerobic, strength training, and flexibility are all an important part of an overall fitness program. Aerobic activity is the component most important because it is what helps in controlling high blood pressure. It does not take hours in the gym every day to see the benefits. Simply add in moderate physical activity to your daily routine to help. Examples of physical activity that increase your heart and breathing rate are: mowing the lawn, raking leaves, scrubbing the floor, going for a walk, taking an aerobic class, jogging, bicycling, and swimming.

Aim for at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity most days of the week. If you are not able to set aside that much time at once split it up into two 15 minute sessions or three 10 minute sessions. Other ways to add physical activity to your day are taking the stairs instead of the elevator or going for a walk on your lunch break.

When you need your doctor's okay

It is best to talk with your doctor before you jump into an exercise program, especially if:

- You are a man older than age 40 or a woman older than age 50
- You smoke
- You are overweight
- You have a chronic health condition, such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol
- You have had a heart attack
- You have a family history of heart-related problems before age 55
- You feel pain in your chest or become dizzy with exertion
- You are unsure if you are in good health

For more information, contact:

Julie Chobdee, MPH, Wellness Program Coordinator at Julie.Chobdee@ucr.edu or x2-1488.

Keep it safe

To reduce the risk of injury while exercising start slowly. Remember to warm up before you exercise and cool down afterwards. Build up the intensity of your workouts gradually. If you would like to try strength training exercise, make sure you have your doctor's okay. Some exercises may increase your blood pressure — especially if you hold your breath while contracting your muscles.

Stop exercise and seek immediate medical care if you experience any of the following warning signs during physical activity:

- Chest pain or tightness
- Dizziness or faintness
- Pain in an arm or your jaw
- Severe shortness of breath
- An irregular heartbeat
- Excessive fatigue

Additional resources

- The American Council of Exercise provides helpful tips on how to [Make Time for Exercise Easy!](#)
- A [Walk a Day](#) has multiple health benefits!
- You can control high blood pressure without medication with these [10 Helpful Lifestyle Changes](#).
- WebMD provides you with practical [Exercise Tips for Getting Started](#).
- Useful [Exercise Tips](#) for those with high blood pressure.

STRESS

How It Affects YOUR Blood Pressure

Reducing stress can help lower high blood pressure. Stress is a normal part of life. But too much stress can lead to emotional, psychological, and even physical problems — including heart disease, high blood pressure, chest pains, or irregular heartbeats. Medical researchers are not sure exactly how stress increases the risk of heart disease. Stress itself might be a risk factor, or it could be that high levels of stress make other risk factors (such as high cholesterol or high blood pressure) worse.

Your Body's Response to Stress

Stress is frequently defined as a fight-or-flight response- a moment when your body produces stress hormones in preparation for fighting your stress or running away from it. This response was useful thousands of years ago when people were facing a wild animal or another threat. Today your body responds to stress and perceived danger in the same way. However, realistic modern threats are losing your job, financial difficulties, being stuck in traffic, public speaking etc. When your body is under stress it responds by producing a surge of stress hormones; causing a temporary increase in your blood pressure and causing your heart to beat faster and your blood vessels to narrow.

Warning Signs of Stress

When your body is exposed to long periods of stress it gives you warning signs that something is wrong. These warning signs should not be ignored, they are telling you that you need to slow down and give your body a break.

Below are some common warning signs of stress:

- **Physical signs:** Dizziness, general headaches and pains, grinding teeth, clenched jaw, indigestion, difficulty sleeping, ringing in the ears, stooped posture, sweaty palms, tiredness, weight gain or loss, and upset stomach to name a few.
- **Mental signs:** Constant worry, difficulty making decisions, forgetfulness, lack of creativity, loss of sense of humor, and inability to concentrate.
- **Emotional signs:** Anger, anxiety, crying, depression, frequent mood swings, irritability, loneliness, negative thinking, nervousness, and sadness.
- **Behavioral signs:** Bossiness, compulsive eating, critical attitude of others, explosive actions, frequent job changes, impulsive actions, increased use of alcohol or drugs, withdrawal from relationships or social situations.

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How to Cope with Stress

While reducing stress might not directly lower blood pressure over the long term using strategies to manage your stress can improve your health in other ways. Mastering stress management techniques can lead to other behavior changes – including those that reduce your blood pressure.

Below are some effective ways to cope with stress:

- **Eat and drink sensibly:** Abusing alcohol and food may seem to reduce stress, but it actually adds to it.
- **Assert yourself:** It is OKAY to say “no,” you do not have to meet others’ expectations on demand.
- **Stop smoking:** Aside from obvious other health risks, nicotine acts as a stimulant and brings on more stress symptoms.
- **Exercise regularly:** Aerobic exercise has been shown to release endorphins- natural substances that help you feel better and maintain a positive attitude.
- **Relax daily:** Find something that helps you relax. Whether it is yoga, Pilates, listening to relaxing music, reading, meditating, etc. find something that works for YOU!
- **Get enough sleep:** even with proper diet and exercise you can’t fight stress without rest, you need time to recover.
- **Simplify your schedule:** If you constantly feel rushed, take a few minutes to review your calendar and make a to-do-list. Prioritize the activities that are most important to you and schedule less time for those with the least importance or eliminate them completely.

Additional resources

Mayo Clinic

- Take a [Stress Assessment](#).
- [Win Control](#) over the stress in your life.
- Effective [Solutions For Your Stressors](#).
- Stress Relief: [Learn How To Say No](#).

WebMD

- Check out WebMD for [Ways To Relieve Stress](#).