

# WHY YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE MATTERS

Everything you need to know – and ways to best keep your blood pressure healthy

HEALTH SERIES | ISSUE 02



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# WHAT IS HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?



**Blood pressure refers to the force of blood pushing against the walls of the arteries as the heart pumps. High blood pressure (or hypertension), however, is a medical condition in which the force of blood is higher than normal. It can lead to dangerous complications, although these can be easily prevented if you set your mind and body to it.**

Think of your veins as a garden hose and your blood as the water that runs through it. If the pressure in the tube increases – say, by clogging one end with a thumb – the added force might damage the hose. The problem is, you won't notice there's anything wrong until the hose bursts. Likewise with hypertension, there are no obvious symptoms. So how do you spot it?

The easiest and safest way is to visit a doctor and have your blood pressure checked via a sphygmomanometer (that's a blood pressure meter). In fact, doctors recommend adults check their blood pressure once every five years, increasing the frequency as they grow older.

Without monitoring your blood pressure, it's difficult to determine if you actually have hypertension – hence its nickname, 'the silent killer.' Often, the complications that arise from high blood pressure are what set the alarm bells ringing. Coronary heart disease (CHD), stroke, kidney failure and aneurysms are just a few of the life-threatening consequences of hypertension. But as these are major illnesses, it's far safer to prevent them altogether by managing your blood pressure well. And doing this is as simple as eating, exercising and living right.



## Causes of hypertension

In most patients, there are no identifiable causes of high blood pressure – some people even go for years without realising they have it! However, there are risk factors to watch out for, most of which can be easily addressed. These include:

- Obesity
- Poor fitness levels
- Smoking
- Consuming too much sodium
- Consuming too little potassium
- Heavy drinking
- Stress

# HOW HIGH IS TOO HIGH?



## Confused by all the numbers you see during blood pressure readings?

Blood pressure is measured by millimetre of mercury (mmHg), and is usually given as xxx/yy mmHg. The larger number on top refers to the pressure in the arteries when the heart beats (called systolic pressure). The smaller number below measures the pressure in the arteries in between heartbeats (called diastolic pressure). These are the benchmarks to look out for:

<90/<60:

### Hypotension

Usually temporary and not considered a disease  
90–120/60–80: Normal

120–130/80–90:

### Prehypertension

Modification to lifestyle, for example a diet change, should be made before this progresses to full-blown hypertension

140–159/90–99:

### Hypertension Stage 1

Extra emphasis on lifestyle changes should be taken, and doctors will usually prescribe minimal drugs

160–180/100–110:

### Hypertension Stage 2

In addition to the above, doctors will recommend a few more types of anti-hypertensive drugs

>180/>110:

### Hypertensive Crisis

If you see this reading on a blood pressure meter, see a doctor immediately

# HYPERTENSION IN THE REGION

**High blood pressure is extremely common in Southeast Asia. One in three adults have it, and the condition is responsible for 1.5 million deaths every year. The World Health Organization calls it “one of the most important causes of premature death,” and cites an ageing population and rapid urbanisation as two of the main reasons for its prevalence in the region.**

largely be attributed to lifestyle factors, managing it is a matter of modifying habits, particularly diets. But with the many different ethnic cuisines in Southeast Asia, where do you start?

## **Chinese cuisine**

Chinese food has a reputation of being healthy – but only if you don't douse everything with sodium-rich soya sauce. Many Chinese dishes also use organ meats. These are high in cholesterol, which is associated with hypertension. So cut back on the *kway chap* and soya sauce if you want to keep your blood pumping healthily.

## **Malay cuisine**

Malay cuisine is often laden with

coconut milk and gravy. These are extremely fattening components that might lead to obesity, a high risk factor for hypertension. Exercising regularly would not only lower your chances of contracting hypertension, it'll help you lose the love handles too.

## **Indian cuisine**

In both Singapore and Malaysia, Indians have the lowest rate of hypertension. This might be due to a diet that generally contains plenty of turmeric and yoghurt. Research has shown that consuming turmeric can lower blood pressure, while a recent study found that eating yoghurt over a long-term period can reduce the risk of developing hypertension – as long as it's low-fat and low-calorie!



## **Do it at home**

Advances in technology mean you can monitor and track your blood pressure readings to gauge the effects of your diet or fitness plans – all in the comfort of your living room.

### **Withings Blood Pressure Monitor**

\$162.98 for iOS devices

Comprising an arm cuff and an app, the Withings Blood Pressure Monitor is a convenient solution for those who want to frequently take blood pressure and heart rate readings without having to visit a clinic. Just strap on the cuff, connect it to your iOS device, and fire up the app. It takes about half a minute to measure your blood pressure, and you can keep track of the numbers via elegantly designed charts.

# COMPLICATIONS FROM HYPERTENSION

**Although its symptoms and causes are usually hidden, the effects of hypertension are very well known: a bevy of dangerous diseases. The most fatal of these is CHD, which is responsible for 16.4% of all premature deaths in Singapore and 22.2% in Malaysia in 2011. Hypertension may also lead to diabetes as well as heart failures, stroke and kidney failure. But don't panic! Here's what you can do to identify – and deal with – these complications.**

## **Coronary Heart Disease (CHD)**

CHD is caused by a build-up of plaque in the arteries that supply oxygen-rich blood to the heart. This takes years to accumulate, and typically, you won't know you have

it until a tipping point is reached and a heart attack strikes. There are, however, many warning signs.

Angina, or chest pain, is the most obvious and common symptom. Patients describe it as a 'heaviness' or pressure in the chest that leads to aching, numbness, and/or a burning sensation. These are often mistaken for heartburn or indigestion, but if these effects persist, then a doctor would be the first person to turn to. Other symptoms include: shortness of breath, heart palpitations, increased heart rate, dizziness and nausea.

Thankfully, you can prevent CHD by making a few small tweaks to your lifestyle. If you opt for a salad during lunch instead of *char kway teow* or other high-cholesterol, high-sodium dishes, that choice will drastically reduce your risk. And it'd help to get off the couch every once in awhile to go for a quick jog. Besides diet and fitness, staying upbeat and having enough downtime from work will also curb stress, another component that contributes to the onset of CHD.

And just like hypertension, it's easy to reduce your risk by exercising more and following a balanced diet. Diet-wise, skip the sugary drinks, load up on white meat instead of red, and replace white bread with healthier wholemeal varieties.



## Stroke

When blood supply to the brain is disrupted, the affected area shuts down, as do the various bodily functions they control. Doctors call this a 'cerebrovascular accident', but we most likely know it better as a stroke. Strokes might result in paralysis to varying degrees, permanent brain damage, and speech and visual defects. Hypertension is the most important modifiable risk factor in strokes.

Besides lowering your blood pressure and blood sugar level, you can prevent a stroke by ordering fewer drinks at the bar, curtailng your smoking habit, and fitting aerobic/cardiovascular exercises – such as jogging, swimming and cycling – into your schedule. Good news for Mediterranean food lovers, too: Olive oil, legumes, seafood, dairy and a daily glass of wine will halve the risk of getting a stroke.

## **Myth: Only old and/or fat people get CHD.**

Even young people are susceptible to CHD. If they smoke regularly, enjoy rich and fatty dishes once too often, and count pressing buttons on a remote control as exercise, then they are at high risk of contracting the condition. The bottom line is: youth is no guarantee of good health! You should live and eat well regardless of age.

# NUTRITION AND YOU

**Modifying what you eat everyday is perhaps the easiest and most effective way to reduce hypertension. As a matter of fact, obesity and high sodium intake are strongly linked to high blood pressure. But fret not, umami lovers. You can still scarf down your bowl of salty ramen as long as you remember to eat it in moderation.**



## The good, the bad and the healthy

Here are some ingredients you should try to incorporate more of in your diet and others you probably shouldn't be gorging on everyday.

### Eat more...

- Potassium. This mineral helps the body regulate blood pressure. Adults should consume at least 4.7 grams of potassium a day; these come from leafy green vegetables, carrots, potatoes, bananas, tomatoes and fruits.
- Whole grains. Ingredients such as oatmeal are great sources of fibre, potassium and magnesium, the latter of which is linked to lowering blood pressure.
- Celery. This vegetable has a compound called 3nb that directly lowers blood pressure. Try eating at least four stalks a day.
- Legumes and nuts. Almonds, tofu, black beans, among others, are high in potassium and healthy fat, but low in sodium.
- Fish. It's high in Omega-3, a fatty acid that not only lowers your risk of hypertension, but cancer and arthritis as well.

### Eat less...

- Sodium. Try to limit yourself to 2,400 milligrams of it a day. That's about a teaspoon of salt.
- Saturated fats. This comes from fatty meats, whole milk, palm and coconut oils, and dairy products made from whole milk.
- Trans fats. All foods made from hydrogenated oil contain trans fats. Common examples include margarine and potato chips, but you should read the label to be sure.
- Calories. Reducing your calorie intake will not only lower your blood pressure, it'll keep your waistline in check!
- Alcohol. Limit yourself to a can of beer or a glass of wine per day.



## Hawker favourites

*Yong tau foo* is the undeniable healthy choice at the hawker centre – only as long as you skip the high-calorie sweet sauce and all those tempting deep-fried options! Hokkien *popiah* is also chock-full of fibre and protein, and a roll makes for a light yet delicious lunch. If you must have that plate of chicken rice, ask for leaner breast meat and set the skin aside.



## Hawker favourites

You'd never guess it, but the local dish with the most amount of sodium is a humble bowl of fishball noodles and its accompanying soup. The clear, salty broth is the main culprit – that's one dish you shouldn't feel guilty not finishing. Other coffee shop staples you should think twice before ordering include *lor mee*, prawn noodles, mutton murta-bak, mee soto and claypot rice.



## DASH DIET

Developed by health authorities in the US, the DASH diet is tailor-made for hypertensive patients or those who want to prevent the condition. It stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension, and emphasises careful control of portion size, low salt intake, and consuming a variety of food, from veggies to meat. Following the diet can reduce your blood pressure in a few weeks, over time it can drop significantly.

Here's what the diet recommends an adult should eat in a day.

### Grains: Six to eight servings

One serving can comprise a single slice of bread, 28g of cereal, or a half-cup of rice or pasta. Whenever possible, pick whole grains, such as brown rice, instead of refined grains such as white rice.

### TIP

*Two slices of bread for breakfast, one sandwich or a small plate of pasta for lunch, and one medium-sized bowl of brown or white rice for dinner*

### Vegetables: Four to five servings

A cup of raw, leafy green vegetables or a half-cup of other cut-up vegetables constitutes a single serving. In addition to leafy greens, focus on tomatoes, carrots, broccoli and sweet potatoes as these are full of fibre and potassium.

### TIP

*A fresh garden salad for lunch to accompany your sandwich or pasta. Have a side of veggies during dinner as well*

### Fruits: Four to five servings

Examples of one serving include: one medium fruit, half a cup of frozen or canned fruit, and 120millilitres of freshly squeezed juice. Try to leave the skins on, as they are high in fibre and other healthy nutrients.

### TIP

*Drink a cup of fruit juice in the morning, and have an apple after lunch. You can snack on dried fruit if you're feeling peckish in the day, too*

### **Dairy: Two to three servings**

Dairy products can be great for controlling your blood pressure, but only if they are low-fat. You can get a single serving from one cup of skim milk (better if it's soya bean milk!) or one cup of yoghurt.

#### **TIP**

*Limit your dairy consumption to the cheese in your salad, or a cup of low-fat yoghurt for breakfast or as a snack*

### **Lean meat, poultry and fish: Six servings max**

A 30g piece of chicken, seafood or lean meat is considered one serving. As all meat contains fat, this is the most important part of your diet you should consider tweaking. Take the time to trim the fat from your meat, and pick fish high in Omega-3, such as salmon and tuna.

#### **TIP**

*Add a few slices of chicken breast to your salad for lunch, and a salmon fillet over brown rice for dinner. Swap the fish for tofu every once in awhile – it's also packed with proteins*

### **Fats and oils: Two to three servings**

Another crucial food group. A serving size is about one tablespoon of mayonnaise, one teaspoon of olive oil, or two tablespoons of salad dressing. The DASH diet focuses on monounsaturated fats rather than saturated fats, so always check the labels on your groceries.

#### **TIP**

*Hold the salad dressing and get your oils during dinner instead*

### **Sweets: Less than one serving**

As a single serving includes one tablespoon of sugar or jam, and half a cup of low-fat ice cream or sorbet, people with a sweet tooth might find it hard to adjust. But you can start slow: instead of decadent chocolate ice cream, try a fruity sorbet, or switch to fresh fruit juices instead of carbonated fizzy drinks.

#### **TIP**

*Drink water wherever possible, and kick-start your day with some jam on your toast if you love your sweets*



## **Start in your kitchen**

A few tips on how you can make home-cooked dishes that are a lot easier on your blood pressure.

- Sodium is a big enemy, but can you really substitute salt? Most definitely! Try garlic powder, onion powder and roasted garlic to add a zing to your dishes. If you want the crunch you get from sea salt, use sunflower or sesame seeds – they're great on salads, too.
- Stock cubes are also high in sodium, so you should consider throwing a bouquet garni (a bunch of herbs tied together) into water instead.
- Keep a food diary to estimate and track the amount of sodium consumed per day.
- Always pay attention to what you buy. Study food labels for their nutritional values the next time you go grocery shopping.
- And most importantly: don't rush into it! Gradually 'train' your palate by making a small changes at a time.



# LIVE GREAT

**After making wiser food choices, small changes to your daily routine is the most effective way to manage your blood pressure. Exercising and relaxation are two easy things you can work into your schedule – even if you're a busy bee.**



## **A** Fitness

Regular exercise can lower systolic blood pressure by five to 10 points, so you shouldn't write it off. Ultimately, you'll want to hit 150 cumulative minutes of physical activity every week if you want to improve your blood pressure. This sounds like a daunting figure, but you should slowly ease into it. If you've been neglecting those running shoes, start with a low- to moderate-intensity exercise, such as a quick two kilometre jog or brisk walk, then increase the frequency and intensity when you feel your body can handle it.

## **Aerobics/cardiovascular**

This is the foremost category when it comes to lowering blood pressure, as these exercises strengthen the heart and lungs while improving the body's oxygen efficiency. Jogging, walking, cycling, swimming and low-impact aerobics are all considered aerobics/cardiovascular workouts.

- Start with 10 to 20 minutes of these exercises, thrice a week, and build it up until you reach the target of 150 minutes a week.
- As there are plenty of exercises that fall under this category, try each one before deciding which you enjoy most.



## **Family-friendly workouts**

Although hypertension is rare in children, that's no excuse for them not getting any exercise – obesity is still a risk factor no matter the age. Getting the whole family together for a spot of fitness fun can be a great way of ensuring the little ones lead active lives, while spurring yourself on at the same time.

- **Playgrounds**  
Don't just sit idly by – join your kids! Practise walking lunges around the playground and then build it up to an exciting race.
- **Cycling**  
If they can cycle, take your kids on a leisurely bike ride. If they're not yet comfortable on bikes, leave yours at home and jog alongside so you can keep an eye on them.
- **Hiking**  
Get your boots on, pack a healthy picnic and head out to the nearest nature reserve. There'll be plenty of flora and fauna to see, and neither you nor your kids will realise calories are being burnt.

- For the sportier types, getting together for a game of basketball or football will make exercise fun.
- If you're especially adventurous, try studying a martial art, such as *muay thai* or Western boxing.

## Stretching

Stretching exercises are primarily meant to relax and lengthen tight muscles. But as they improve circulation, these exercises promote healthy blood pressure as well. Doing them in a quiet environment will also calm you down and decrease stress, making them excellent additions to your existing regimen. Try this stretch every night before you hit the sack:

- **Runner's Stretch**
  - Stand straight, step your right foot forward and lower your body into a lunge. Place your fingers on the floor.
  - Breathe in. Then, as you exhale, straighten your right leg. Gently return to the lunge position.
  - Do this four times before switching sides and repeating the process.



## **B** Stress

While your blood pressure levels can balloon as a result of stress, it usually goes back to normal after some time. Despite this, being constantly stressed out can lead to the development of hypertension, as you tend to sleep poorly, eat less healthily (or not at all) and consume alcohol more frequently.



## For relaxing times...

Relaxing isn't all about cracking open a bottle of beer and slumping on your favourite couch in front of the TV. You'll need to activate your body's natural relaxation response to really unwind. Try this deep breathing exercise for a start.

- 1 Sit comfortably with your back straightened. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- 2 Inhale through your nose, from your abdomen. The hand on your stomach, not the one on your chest, should rise.
- 3 Exhale through your mouth while pushing as much air out as you can. Use your abdominal muscles to help. As with inhaling, the hand on your stomach should move.
- 4 Repeat for about 10 minutes every day. If you prefer, you can close your eyes and picture yourself in a tranquil environment. You can also lie down instead of sitting upright if you find that more comfortable.

## Are you stressed out?

### Physical signs

- Dizziness
- Grinding teeth
- General aches and pains
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Racing heart
- Sweaty palms
- Exhaustion
- Extreme weight gain or loss

### Mental signs

- Anger
- Anxiety

- Depression
- Feeling powerless
- Difficulty making decisions
- Forgetfulness
- Inability to concentrate
- Frequent mood swings

### Behavioural signs

- Bossiness
- Critical towards others
- Impulsive actions
- Social withdrawal
- Explosive actions

## **C** Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

TCM doesn't see hypertension as an illness so much as a warning sign of imbalances in the human body. According to TCM, hypertension is related to dysfunction of *qi* (energy) in the liver, heart and kidneys. As such, TCM treatments for high blood pressure will generally focus on regulating *qi* in these organs. Here are two ways you can to treat your blood pressure the natural, TCM way.



### **Qigong**

*Qigong* is a breathing technique that *taiji* practitioners often use, which is intended to improve the circulation of energy throughout the body. Long-term practise of *qigong* has been proven to lead to a drop in blood pressure, but it should be used as a complementary treatment. Here is one *qigong* exercise that's so quick and easy, you can practise it multiple times a day:

- 1 Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. Your toes should point forward and your knees should be slightly bent. Remember to breathe deep and slowly through your abdomen, not your chest.
- 2 Bend your torso until your arms hang past your knees.
- 3 Swing your arms loosely from side to side. Use momentum instead of force; your arms should be relaxed and loose.
- 4 Continue for several minutes. Before you rise up, strike the back of your knees three to five times with your fists.
- 5 Repeat three to six times a day.



### **Yin versus Yang**

The idea of 'Yin and Yang' is a fundamental principle in TCM. TCM believes that Yin and Yang are related but opposing forces in the body; their levels should be kept in balance, else you might run the risk of falling ill. In TCM, different foodstuffs have different properties depending on its effect upon the body. Generally speaking, yin refers to 'cooling' and 'female' properties, while yang refers to 'heaty' and 'male' properties.

### **Releasing Pressure**

Although hypertension is a dangerous condition, it is one that is easily preventable, unlike other major killers such as cancer. Small adjustments here and there will go a long way – there's no need for a major overhaul of your life! Just practise a little more discretion in what you eat to maintain healthy blood pressure. It's all in your hands.

# GREAT STARTS SMALL. LIVE GREAT.

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