

Exercising Your Way to Lower Blood Pressure



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Hypertension, defined as a chronically elevated blood pressure greater than 140/90 mmHg, affects nearly 75 million Americans. If left untreated, hypertension can dramatically increase your risk for heart attacks, strokes and peripheral arterial disease. Exercise not only improves the workings of the cardiovascular system, but can lower blood pressure as well. The key to maximizing the benefits of exercise is to follow a well-designed program that you can stick to over the long-term.

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE FACTS

- Elevation in blood pressure increases chances of heart attack or stroke.
- More than 75 million Americans have high blood pressure.
- Three out of every four people over age 60 has high blood pressure.
- Many men and women don't even know they have high blood pressure because it has few symptoms.
- High blood pressure can be controlled, decreasing your chance of a heart attack or stroke.
- Death rates from heart attacks and strokes in the United States have decreased by 40-60 percent over the last 30 years.

TREATMENT CHOICES

- Markedly elevated blood pressure (the systolic [upper] value above 180 or the diastolic [lower] value above 110) should be treated by medication immediately. Once under control with medication, increased physical activity may decrease your blood pressure further.
- Mild to moderate cases of elevated blood pressure can benefit from healthy lifestyle changes – including increased exercise, decreased salt intake, improved overall diet and weight loss.
- Work with your physician to ensure you properly treat high blood pressure.
- Exercise generally decreases both the systolic and diastolic value by five to seven points, and the decrease can occur as early as three to four weeks after increasing your activity level.
- Physical activity also assists with weight control and improves blood cholesterol and glucose levels so that the risk of heart attack and stroke is lower, even if your blood pressure is not reduced to normal levels.
- Being active is also important for people with pre-hypertension (systolic pressures of 120 to 139 and diastolic pressures of 80 to 89) and for people with normal blood pressure who have a family history of high blood pressure.

HOW SHOULD YOU EXERCISE?

There are no specific exercises designed to lower blood pressure. In fact, many activities of daily life will be beneficial – like walking, taking the stairs and moderate to vigorous yardwork or housework.

Other beneficial exercises include:

- Jogging
- Swimming
- Cycling

- Aerobics
- Walking

Mild exercises, such as walking, may reduce blood pressure just as much as strenuous activities, such as jogging. Physical activity should elevate your heart rate and breathing somewhat, but you should still be able to easily carry on a conversation while doing these activities.

Please consult your physician prior to engaging in a vigorous exercise program, such as jogging or running.

While many blood pressure medications may have negative side effects, the side effects of exercise are generally positive— helping control weight while improving glucose levels, cholesterol levels and heart function. Injuries may occur when you exercise, but these are minimal if you don't overdo it when you start and if you progress slowly.

WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH

Most of us find it difficult to add exercise to our already busy day — even if it will improve our health. However, the physical activity required to lower blood pressure can be added without making major lifestyle changes.

Simple changes you can make include:

- Park your car further away so you can walk some to and from work.
- Take the stairs, not the elevator.
- Take a 10-15 minute walk during your lunch break.
- Choose a restaurant with low-fat, low cholesterol options and walk to it for lunch.
- Take your children or grandchildren to the park.
- Take a 30-minute window-shopping walk around the mall when weather is bad.
- Wake up 30 minutes earlier in the morning, and start your day with exercise. Most people find they look forward to their exercise time.
- Vary the activities to make exercise interesting.

Any amount of physical activity, even low intensity exercise such as walking, can lower your blood pressure, and the health benefits of exercise for your cardiovascular system are substantial and definitely worth the effort.

A COMPLETE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAM

A well-rounded physical activity program includes aerobic exercise and strength training exercise, but not necessarily in the same session. This blend helps maintain or improve cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness and overall health and function. Regular physical activity will provide more health benefits than sporadic, high intensity workouts, so choose exercises you are likely to enjoy and that you can incorporate into your schedule.

ACSM's physical activity recommendations for healthy adults, updated in 2011, recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (working hard enough to break a sweat, but still able to carry on a conversation) five days per week, or 20 minutes of more vigorous activity three days per week. Combinations of moderate- and vigorous intensity activity can be performed to meet this recommendation.

Examples of typical aerobic exercises are:

- Walking
- Running
- Stair climbing
- Cycling
- Rowing
- Cross country skiing
- Swimming.



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In addition, strength training should be performed a minimum of two days each week, with 8-12 repetitions of 8-10 different exercises that target all major muscle groups. This type of training can be accomplished using body weight, resistance bands, free weights, medicine balls or weight machines.

STAYING ACTIVE PAYS OFF!

Those who are physically active tend to live longer, healthier lives. Research shows that moderate physical activity – such as 30 minutes a day of brisk walking – significantly contributes to longevity. Even a person with risk factors like high blood pressure, diabetes or even a smoking habit can gain real benefits from incorporating regular physical activity into their daily life.

As many dieters have found, exercise can help you stay on a diet and lose weight. What's more – regular exercise can help lower blood pressure, control blood sugar, improve cholesterol levels and build stronger, denser bones.

THE FIRST STEP

Before you begin an exercise program, take a fitness test, or substantially increase your level of activity, make sure to answer the following questions. This physical activity readiness questionnaire (PAR-Q) will help determine if you're ready to begin an exercise routine or program.

- Has your doctor ever said that you have a heart condition or that you should participate in physical activity only as recommended by a doctor?
- Do you feel pain in your chest during physical activity?
- In the past month, have you had chest pain when you were not doing physical activity?
- Do you lose your balance from dizziness? Do you ever lose consciousness?
- Do you have a bone or joint problem that could be made worse by a change in your physical activity?
- Is your doctor currently prescribing drugs for your blood pressure or a heart condition?
- Do you know of any reason you should not participate in physical activity?

If you answered yes to one or more questions, if you are over 40 years of age and have recently been inactive, or if you are concerned about your health, consult a physician before taking a fitness test or substantially increasing your physical activity. If you answered no to each question, then it's likely that you can safely begin exercising.

PRIOR TO EXERCISE

Prior to beginning any exercise program, including the activities depicted in this brochure, individuals should seek medical evaluation and clearance to engage in activity. Not all exercise programs are suitable for everyone, and some programs may result in injury. Activities should be carried out at a pace that is comfortable for the user. Users should discontinue participation in any exercise activity that causes pain or discomfort. In such event, medical consultation should be immediately obtained.