

# Eating to Beat Hypertension



It used to be that a diagnosis of high blood pressure (hypertension) came with a single, stern piece of advice from the doctor: Cut out the salt!

Well, times have changed. Researchers have realized that this one-size-fits-all diet restriction doesn't work for everyone because not all bodies respond to a low-sodium diet with a lower blood pressure.

So scientists went back to the drawing board. What they returned with was an all-encompassing eating plan that con-

siders the fact that blood pressure is controlled by a complex combination of nutrients, not just salt. They call this plan Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension, better known as DASH.

With the DASH plan, you still need to watch your salt intake. The recommendation is 1,500 to 2,300 milligrams per day. The lower the sodium intake, researchers say, the more your blood pressure will drop. If your blood pressure is only slightly high, somewhere

around 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day would be a good amount. That's about 1 teaspoon of salt.

However, trying to consume only 1 teaspoon of salt may be a bit challenging at first if you're like the average American. "The average sodium intake is 3,375 milligrams a day, and some adult males consume more than 4,300 milligrams per day," according to Victoria Shanta Retelny, RD, LD, owner of Chicago-based LivingWell Communications.

But with DASH, it's all about adding foods to your diet instead of restricting intake. "The basic dietary principles of DASH are to incorporate more whole foods: fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, legumes, and low-fat dairy products," says Retelny. The table on page 12 details how much of each food group you should consume to meet DASH goals. The number of servings per day is based on an intake of about 1,600 to 2,000 calories daily. If you eat more or less than that, adjust the daily servings accordingly. However, keep in mind that if you're overweight, losing a few pounds can have a positive affect on your blood pressure.

Of course, since weight may be of concern and you want to keep your heart healthy while lowering your blood pressure, you should pay attention to the amount of fat and added sugars in your diet. Some fats are healthy for us, and we actually need some to absorb certain vitamins. Plus, it makes food taste good. Eating too much is the problem, so try to keep your intake to about two to three servings per day. A serving of fat is 2 tablespoons of salad dressing, 1 tablespoon of mayonnaise, 1 teaspoon of olive or canola oil, or 1 teaspoon of a soft, plant-based spread such as I Can't Believe It's Not Butter or Country Crock.

If you have a sweet tooth, try to keep your intake to no more than about 1 tablespoon of sugar per day. That includes whatever you may put in coffee



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or tea and any jelly or jam you may use. In addition, ½ cup of gelatin or sorbet equals about 1 tablespoon of sugar, as does a mere ½ cup of soda. And, Retelny notes, "Do not discount physical activity for lowering blood pressure. The new guidelines are 150 minutes, or 2½ hours per week."

Depending on your tastes, some of these recommendations may be a bit hard to swallow, while others you may already have taken. As with any eating plan, these are suggestions you should try to follow

most of the time. In the real world, occasions arise that allow for some splurging here and there: a special birthday, an anniversary, or a holiday. If you eat healthfully the majority of the time, these once-in-a-while treats shouldn't be a problem—as long as you don't start making up reasons to celebrate, such as your cat's fifth birthday or the anniversary of the day you painted the living room. ♣

— Heidi Reichenberger McIndoo,  
 MS, RD, LDN

Food Group	Number of Servings Per Day	Serving Sizes	Examples/Tips
Grains	6-8	1 slice of bread; 1 oz dry cereal; ½ cup cooked rice, pasta, cereal, or other grain	Try to make the most of your grain choices by using whole grain options.
Vegetables	4-5	1 cup raw leafy veggies; ½ cup raw or cooked cut veggies	Add chopped veggies to an omelet for breakfast, have a salad and cooked veggies with dinner or, for lunch, try a large salad topped with sliced turkey.
Fruits	4-5	1 medium piece of fruit; ½ cup fresh, frozen, or canned; ¼ cup dried	Mix cut fruit with yogurt for an easy breakfast or serve fruit as a sweet ending to lunch or dinner.
Low-fat or fat-free dairy	2-3	1 cup milk or yogurt; 1½ oz cheese	Try replacing a sugar-filled drink with milk at one meal per day, and yogurt mixed with fruit makes a great snack.
Lean protein	6 or fewer	1 oz cooked beef, poultry, fish, or tofu; 1 egg	A piece of meat the size and thickness of the palm of your hand (not counting fingers) is about 3 ounces. Also, hard boil eggs in advance for a quick on-the-go breakfast.
Nuts, seeds, and legumes	4-5 per week	1½ oz nuts; 2 tablespoons nut butter; 2 tablespoons seeds; ½ cup cooked beans (dried, not green or string beans)	Sprinkle nuts on a salad, have some peanut butter on toast, or add beans to chili and soups.