



## What is Hypertension?

It's when your blood pressure (BP) is too high. The optimal "normal" BP is 120/80. Don't panic if you're 130/82 or something like that. It's when BP is say 160/110 that you're in danger. It can go higher than that, but you certainly don't want it to.

## What do those numbers mean?

The top number is the systolic pressure. This is when your heart muscle contracts and sends blood into the aorta and pulmonary artery. The bottom number is the diastolic measurement, when the heart muscle relaxes and refills with blood before the next contraction. It's a measure of maximum and minimum pressure in the arteries.

## Why does BP go too high?

Everyone's BP fluctuates. Running for a bus, having an argument, sports and all sorts of things temporarily raise BP. The worry is when it doesn't return to normal in 15-20 minutes of relaxation. It is of course more common in older people.



## What can cause hypertension?

Lots of things. Probably the most common is eating too much salt in the diet over a long time. The salt-receptors on our tongues get less sensitive with age, and since you can't taste the salt, you add too much without realising it. Another cause is an infection called *Chlamydia pneumoniae*. It causes inflammation in the blood vessels and helps cause heart disease. Drinking way too much coffee in a high stress job is another good way to raise your BP quickly, and smoking doesn't help either as it constricts the peripheral blood vessels. Being overweight, having a chronic snoring problem (apnoea) and taking various medications can also cause it.

Some pregnant women also get high blood pressure, and this is called pre-eclampsia. If not treated it can lead to eclampsia and death. If you're pregnant (it doesn't matter what age you are) and have high BP, seek treatment fast. You may be taken to hospital and put on a drip which contains magnesium.



## What's the conventional treatment for hypertension?

There are quite a lot of pharmaceutical products prescribed by doctors. These include beta-blockers, diuretics, alpha-blockers, angiotensin inhibitors and calcium channel blockers. While these may be effective for you, many of them have side effects including headaches, fatigue, weight gain and more. If you are concerned about side effects you should ask your doctor to go through MIMS with you to examine the symptoms and their consequences. There are definitely other ways of treating mild to moderate hypertension, but, if you are not willing to change whatever is causing it, then maybe drugs are the best option.

## So what would a naturopath do that's different?

Most cases of hypertension can be treated with diet and lifestyle modification. We'd look at making sure you're not overweight, ways of managing stress, reducing stimulants like coffee and cigarettes, balancing mineral intake and probably supplementing with magnesium and other nutrients if necessary. Magnesium is particularly important in reducing hypertension.



## Why is magnesium so important? What does it do?

Magnesium activates what's called the sodium/potassium pump to make sure that sodium (salt) is removed from cells efficiently. It also helps you to generate energy from your food because it is a co-factor in the Krebs (or Citric Acid) Cycle which is how your cells make energy, and when you feel more energetic, you can exercise and improve your health. However, if you have severe kidney or heart disease, magnesium has to be used carefully. If you do have complex health conditions, it's really important that you don't self-medicate or you could do a lot of harm.



## What other nutrients are important?

Increasing your potassium intake is good, and often effective alone in reducing hypertension as long as you also reduce your salt intake. Vitamin C will lower BP a little in mild cases, and it also helps the excretion of lead which is another causative factor in hypertension. Vitamin B6, calcium, CoQ10 and omega-3 oils are all useful, but need to be part of a whole treatment package.

## I've heard that some herbs are useful.

Yes. Hawthorn (*Crataegus*) is an excellent heart herb, and has a mild hypotensive effect. It takes a few weeks before the effects are really felt. Garlic is another great herb/food which can be added to the diet or taken as a supplement. You need to see a naturopath about taking herbal mixtures.

## So, should I treat hypertension myself?

No. You should go to a qualified practitioner, either a doctor or a naturopath. You can certainly take steps to reduce your stress levels at any time, and modify your lifestyle. Go to a yoga or tai chi group, or take up meditation. Use Rescue Remedy to calm down a bit, and lower the salt in your diet. All that will help, but you do need a full health assessment.

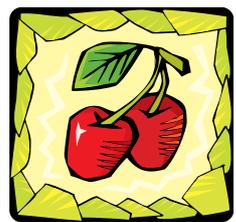


## Can we do it all with diet?

That depends on your overall health status. Some people may simply have to use drugs to lower their BP. If you have very severe hypertension, you could be at risk of a stroke, heart attack or kidney failure, so don't risk those. But if your case is mild, you can certainly do yourself a lot of good with diet.

## What foods are good?

We've already mentioned garlic. Celery and onions have benefits, but overall you want to have a healthy wholefood diet with plenty of fibre and antioxidants, low in saturated fat but high in mono- and polyunsaturated oils (olive oil, fish oils) and gear that diet towards achieving your ideal weight. Lots of salads, stir-fries, lean meat, oily fish, raw fruit and wholegrains. Eliminate salt and if possible, coffee and all caffeine drinks. So-called "energy drinks" are high in caffeine and will help cause hypertension. Drink green tea, water, fresh carrot & celery juice and protein smoothies if you need more protein in your diet. Avoid alcohol too.



## What about exercise?

Absolutely beneficial. Gentle exercise if you have severe hypertension. Go for a walk with the dog and build up the time gradually. Exercise helps your heart and overall oxygenation of tissues. Ask your practitioner if in doubt, but be very sensible, and try to do some exercise every day. Most forms of exercise are good, but extreme sports are better avoided, and aerobic exercise is best for hypertension. Don't become a weight-lifter if you have BP problems.

## Anything else?

Maybe counselling to help you accept change in your life. A weekly massage or aromatherapy session to de-stress you. Breathwork or hypnosis if you have real emotional problems such as unresolved grief or trauma. Learn to be happy and keep some time for yourself. If you can't, you need to look at why you think like that.



## Where can I get more information?

There are literally millions of websites with information about hypertension, and there will also be books at your local library. Read carefully, and select websites which are written by health professionals.