



**IRISH HEART
FOUNDATION**
Fighting Heart Disease & Stroke

MANAGE YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE

and reduce your risk
of heart disease
and stroke



What is blood pressure?

Everyone has blood pressure. It shows the amount of work that your heart has to do to pump blood around the body.



120

80

High blood pressure (hypertension) usually has no symptoms. If not treated or kept under control, it is one of the major risk factors for heart disease and stroke.

Two numbers measure the level of blood pressure. One number records blood pressure when the pressure is at its highest, as the heart muscle squeezes out the blood from the heart - this is called systolic pressure. Then the heart relaxes, which allows the blood to flow back into the heart - this is called diastolic pressure.

The normal level of blood pressure is usually about 120 (systolic) over 80 (diastolic). If you have been told that your blood pressure is 140 over 90 or higher (or 140 over 80 if you have diabetes) you should discuss this with your family doctor.

Know your blood pressure

If you are diagnosed with high blood pressure, it means your blood pressure is consistently higher than it should be. The higher your blood pressure, the greater your risk of heart attack or stroke.

How do I know if my blood pressure is high?

You have high blood pressure if either your systolic blood pressure is 140 mmHg or higher, or your diastolic blood pressure is 90 mmHg or higher, after it has been measured a number of different times.

A person with high blood pressure may feel well, look well and rarely has any symptoms. The only way to find out if you have high blood pressure is to have it measured. Blood pressure varies with age and depends on how active you are before it is measured. If you are nervous or anxious, the measurement can be higher than usual.

One high reading does not necessarily mean that you have seriously high blood pressure. Your doctor will usually want to check your blood pressure several times, before deciding whether or not you have high blood pressure.

If you have a high reading at your first appointment, you should be asked back for at least two more appointments so that your measurements can be checked. The more blood pressure readings you have, the more accurate your diagnosis of high blood pressure will be, particularly as blood pressure fluctuates throughout the day and night.



24 hour blood pressure monitoring

If your blood pressure is more than 140 over 90, you should have it monitored over 24-hours. This monitoring uses a small device on a belt at your waist, attached to a blood pressure cuff on your arm.

The device measures your blood pressure 2-3 times each hour. This gives your doctor many more blood pressure readings to help decide if you have high blood pressure and if you need treatment. Monitoring blood pressure over 24 hours is very useful in diagnosing white coat hypertension.

About a quarter of those having their blood pressure checked in a surgery or clinic have what is called “white coat hypertension”, This happens because many people become anxious about having their blood pressure checked and in turn their blood pressure levels become raised.

More and more pharmacies are now offering blood pressure checks and some do 24-hour blood pressure monitoring. For more information on 24-hour blood pressure monitoring, see www.irishheart.ie.

Sometimes your doctor will suggest you buy a reliable blood pressure monitor and measure your blood pressure regularly at home. Or you may have the opportunity to have your blood pressure checked in your local pharmacy and if you are on tablets, to see that it is properly controlled.

In **mild or borderline cases**, the doctor may recommend the following changes to your lifestyle:

- be more physically active
- be a healthy weight
- if you smoke, stop smoking
- eat a diet high in fruit and vegetables and low in fat, salt and processed foods
- drink less alcohol and keep within the recommended limits

These lifestyle changes may help to reduce your blood pressure and can sometimes bring blood pressure that is mildly high to a normal level, but for most people, tablets that lower blood pressure will be required.

What can happen if you have high blood pressure?

High blood pressure causes stroke, heart attack, heart failure, kidney failure and peripheral arterial disease (poor circulation in your legs). These problems can be avoided if your blood pressure is controlled.

Medication and high blood pressure

For most people with high blood pressure, tablets prescribed by your doctor will reduce your blood pressure to normal or healthy levels. Your doctor may organise further 24-hour blood pressure monitoring for you after starting treatment to make sure these new tablets have brought your blood pressure down to normal.

The number and type of tablet varies from one person to the next, and depends on how the blood pressure responds to the treatment.

Over half of adults in Ireland over 45 years of age have high blood pressure. About 4 in every 5 men and 2 in every 3 women with high blood pressure are not being treated.

If you are over 30, you should have your blood pressure checked at least every 5 years. If your blood pressure is borderline high (around 140 over 90), it should be checked more often by your family doctor or practice nurse.

What causes high blood pressure?

There is often no single cause of high blood pressure. A number of factors combine to raise blood pressure and high blood pressure tends to run in families.



Being overweight, drinking too much alcohol, eating too much sodium (found in salt) and not eating enough fresh fruit and vegetables may lead to an increase in blood pressure. As you grow older, your blood pressure increases.



Contrary to popular opinion, high blood pressure is not a disease of the nervous or highly strung person, nor is it caused by a stressful lifestyle. In a very small number of people, there is a specific cause for high blood pressure, and removing the cause can produce a 'cure'. Your doctor will know when to look out for signs of these rare conditions.

What do I do to reduce high blood pressure?

Always take your tablets

If you have been prescribed tablets for high blood pressure, you will usually have to take them for life. Tablets that lower blood pressure prevent early ageing of the blood vessels and heart and reduce your risk of stroke.

Blood pressure tablets, in general, have few side effects, and usually after a month or so you will know how they suit you. If you find that a particular tablet doesn't suit you, or if you are reluctant to take a number of tablets daily, do tell your family doctor rather than suffer in silence. Your doctor has the option of switching you to a different type of tablet, or to one tablet which acts in a number of different ways. Sometimes the tablet will not control your blood pressure; your doctor may then increase your dose, add another tablet, or switch you to a different tablet.

Do not stop taking the prescribed tablets. Evidence shows that tablets for high blood pressure will reduce your risk of having a stroke.



A healthy lifestyle can help keep down blood pressure levels. This is particularly important if you have been told that you have high blood pressure.

Aim for a healthy weight

Keep your weight at a level that is right for your height and build. If you are overweight or obese, even losing 10% of excess weight can help lower blood pressure.

Eat less salt and more fruit and vegetables

It is the sodium in salt which causes the problems associated with high blood pressure. All types of salt, including sea salt, iodised salt, garlic salt and onion salt all contain sodium and so they have the same effect on your health as common table salt. Using low sodium salt may mean you use more to get the salty taste and therefore still consume the same amount of salt. The best advice is to use alternative flavourings.

To make sure that your blood pressure stays at a healthy level, reduce the amount of salt you add to your food at the table and eat less processed foods which are high in salt. Include more fresh vegetables, fruit and wholegrain cereals in your diet.

See our booklet ***"Time to cut down on salt"*** for more information.

A healthy lifestyle can help to keep down blood pressure levels.



Drink less alcohol

Small amounts of alcohol may provide some protection against heart disease, but there is not enough evidence to recommend including alcohol as part of a heart healthy diet. Drinking large amounts of alcohol can increase blood pressure and may damage the liver and heart.

If you do drink, spread your drinking over the week, keep some days alcohol-free and do not drink more than the recommended upper limits:

- **For men 17 standard drinks a week.**
- **For women 11 standard drinks a week.**

	standard drinks
 1 Pint =	2
 Half a pint =	1
 Bottle of wine (750ml) =	7
 1 small glass of wine (100ml) =	1
 Spirits - pub single measure =	1

Remember that alcohol is a drug and may be a risk for other health problems.



Be more active

All adults should aim to be physically active at a moderate intensity for at least 30 minutes 5 days a week. Increasing activities to 60 minutes brings even greater health benefits. Activities such as walking, cycling, swimming and dancing are all excellent and the 30 to 60 minutes can be spread over two to three sessions in the day. An added bonus is that any activity, such as walking, promotes both heart health and relaxation. If you have very high blood pressure, consult your doctor before you start doing any form of activity.

Other risks for heart attack and stroke

Smoking and high blood pressure are two serious factors that can cause a heart attack or stroke. You can greatly reduce this risk by immediately stopping smoking. There are now many aids available to help you stop and you can get advice from your family doctor, pharmacist, local HSE office or you can phone the National Smokers' Quitline at 1850 201 203. If you are not ready to stop smoking, try to reduce the number of cigarettes you smoke and plan to quit.

High cholesterol is often associated with high blood pressure. If you have high blood pressure you should have your cholesterol checked by your doctor. Eating less fat and fatty foods as well as lots of fruit and vegetables will help keep your cholesterol at a healthy level.

Diabetes can also be associated with high blood pressure and your doctor will test your urine (or blood) for sugar.

The more cardiovascular risk factors you have, the greater the urgency in getting your blood pressure controlled. This is also the case for people with a history of a heart attack or stroke.

Low blood pressure

If your blood pressure drops when you stand up, making you feel dizzy or faint, this is called postural hypotension (low blood pressure). If this happens, you should tell your doctor and have your blood pressure taken when you are standing up. These symptoms can be made worse by blood pressure tablets.



Check your blood pressure

The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to have it measured. Have your blood pressure checked regularly by your family doctor and ask what your blood pressure reading is. If it is high, you should discuss with your doctor how best to bring it down to normal as soon as possible. **If you are prescribed tablets for high blood pressure, always take them as prescribed and never stop taking your tablets without telling your doctor.**

For a healthy level of blood pressure:

- know your blood pressure level
- aim for a healthy weight
- eat less salt and more fruit and vegetables
- drink less alcohol
- be more physically active for at least 30 minutes 5 days a week.

High blood pressure is best managed by you and your doctor.

For more information contact:

The Irish Heart Foundation's
National Heart and Stroke Helpline on

Locall 1890 432 787

your local HSE office, your doctor or
pharmacist, or visit the IHF's website

www.irisheart.ie

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Please make a donation today

The Irish Heart Foundation is Ireland's national charity dedicated to the reduction of death and disability from heart disease and stroke. Over 90% of our funding comes from public and business donations. We depend on your goodwill and generosity to continue our work.

If you found this booklet useful, please help our charity to continue to provide heart and stroke information by donating today.

You can make your donation today:

By post: Irish Heart Foundation,
50 Ringsend Road, Dublin 4

Online: www.irishheart.ie

By phone: 01 6685001

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Signature: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / ____

The Irish Heart Foundation is committed to best practice in fundraising and adheres to the **statement of guiding principles for fundraising** promoting transparency, honesty and accountability. Any personal information you provide will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003.

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Amount: €21* €18 €15 €10
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* If you donate €250 in one year (or €21 per month) we can claim tax back at no cost to you.

** Last 3 digits on the signature strip on the reverse of your card.

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- You can cancel the Direct Debit Instruction by writing in good time to your Bank.



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www.stroke.ie



Funding:

The Irish Heart Foundation is the national charity fighting heart disease and stroke and relies on charitable donations for 90 per cent of its funding. We support, educate and train people to save lives, campaign for patients, promote positive health strategies, support research and provide vital public information. We need your support - through donations, as a volunteer or on our training courses.

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