



**Physical activity  
and high blood pressure**



## How does physical activity help if you have high blood pressure?

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Physical activity helps reduce other risk factors for heart disease

- your blood pressure measurement is made up of two numbers, eg, 140/85mmHg. The first number is the pressure during heartbeats (systolic pressure), and the second is the pressure between heartbeats (diastolic pressure). Regular physical activity can lower systolic pressure by 10mmHg, and diastolic by 8mmHg
  - people usually get the biggest reduction in blood pressure within the first 10 weeks of activity. However, you need to remain active to maintain the benefits
  - increasing your level of activity helps speed up your metabolism. This helps burn more calories and, as long as you don't eat more to compensate for this, you will lose weight
  - physical activity helps reduce other risk factors for heart disease such as high blood cholesterol levels, being overweight, developing diabetes and the risk of having a stroke
  - physical activity, along with a healthy diet, helps to reduce stress and improves your overall feeling of well-being and quality of life, and helps you to sleep well.
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## What type of activity is best?

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While stamina-based activity is particularly important for people with high blood pressure, you also need to include some strength and flexibility-based activity to get the best health gains.

### Stamina-type activities:

Walking, swimming, cycling, tennis, dancing and housework (washing floors or windows)

### Strength-type activities:

Walking uphill, carrying shopping, climbing stairs, gardening (digging or mowing) and housework (hoovering)

### Flexibility-type activities:

Swimming, dancing, yoga, Pilates, T'ai Chi and gardening (weeding)

### Tips on increasing your activity level:

- walking is an ideal activity as it's free and easy to do anywhere. Perhaps take a dog for a walk to make it more interesting
- look for opportunities to be active during your whole day. For example park at the far end of the car park, or walk one stop further to catch the bus, and take 10 minutes out of your lunch break to go for a walk
- try using the stairs instead of the escalator. Start by walking part of the way up the escalator and gradually progress to walking up the whole way
- choose activities that you enjoy doing. Involve your friends and family to make your activities fun, sociable and enjoyable.



Involve your friends and family to make your activities fun, sociable and enjoyable

## How much and how often?

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- your main aim is to build up to 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity on 5 or more days of the week. If this seems too much to start with, try starting with 3 x 10 minute walks spread throughout the day and work towards 2 x 15 minute walks and then 30 continuous minutes. One goal is to try and increase your activity by 2 minutes each day
  - moderate intensity activity means breathing harder and getting warmer than normal. It does not need to be hard. You should be able to talk and be active at the same time
  - set yourself realistic goals and don't worry if you miss one day. Just make sure that the next day you pick up where you left off
  - try to avoid sitting still for more than 20 minutes
  - whatever your chosen activity, it should be performed at a gentle intensity for the first 10 minutes of exercise. This gets the blood flowing to your muscles and allows your heart rate to increase gradually. After this time, you should have reached the level of intensity which you can maintain for your chosen period of activity. When you are nearing the end of your activity you should also slowly decrease the level of activity over 5-10 minutes to allow your heart rate to slow down gradually.
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## Staying safe

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Remember: The more active you are, the more benefits you will get

- it is important to have your blood pressure checked before starting any activity and regularly after this
  - it is safe to exercise with high blood pressure unless it is very high and your GP will advise you about this when you have your blood pressure checked
  - if you do not know how much physical activity you can do safely or you have other medical problems such as arthritis, ask your GP or practice nurse for advice
  - avoid 'high intensity resistance training', such as lifting heavy weights
  - make sure you don't hold your breath, especially if you are lifting anything heavy such as suitcases, as this temporarily increases your blood pressure and puts additional strain on your heart
  - beta-blockers reduce your heart rate so when exercising don't use your heart rate as a way of telling how hard you are working, or when to slow down
  - it is important to make sure you take your medication so your blood pressure is well-maintained.
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If you get any of the following problems, speak to your GP or contact NHS Direct:

- discomfort in your chest or upper body brought on by physical activity
- uncomfortable or severe breathlessness during your activity
- dizziness or nausea on exertion
- fainting during or just after doing physical activity
- palpitation (a very fast or irregular heart beat) during activity.

## Be active – be safe – have fun

### For more information:

The British Heart Foundation also produces other educational materials which may be of interest. To find out about these or to order your Publications and Videos catalogue please go to our website or call our orderline number listed below.

NHS Direct: **0845 4647** or Website: **www.nhsdirect.co.uk**

Other leaflets in this series which can be ordered by health professionals include:

Physical activity and angina (G98)

Physical activity for weight loss (G99)

Physical activity after a heart attack (G100)

Physical activity and diabetes (G102)

Re-order line for health professionals: **0870 600 6566**

**Important: This leaflet is not a substitute for the advice your doctor may give you based on his or her knowledge of your condition.**

### British Heart Foundation

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Website: [bhf.org.uk](http://bhf.org.uk)

### Heart Information Line

08450 70 80 70

(a local rate number)

A helpline service for the public and health

professionals providing information on a wide range of issues relating to heart health.

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