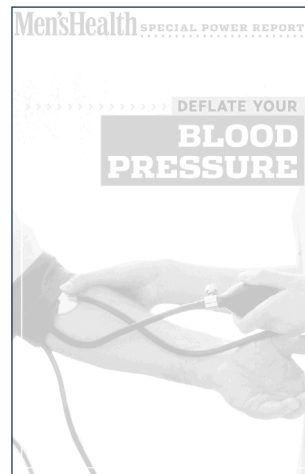


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DEFLATE YOUR

BLOOD PRESSURE

**MAKE A FEW CHANGES AND YOU
COULD BE HOME DRUG-FREE!**

A third of all men already have high blood pressure, but don't even know it. That's because 99% of the time, it has no physical symptoms. Yet high blood pressure triples your risk of dying of a heart attack and quadruples your risk of heart failure. It's the leading cause of stroke, the second-leading cause of kidney failure, and can contribute to damaged arteries and even Alzheimer's disease.

Smoking and being overweight are the two biggest risk factors for hypertension. Smoking elevates blood pressure by increasing heart rate and constricting blood vessels. And for each added pound of body fat, the heart must beat harder in order to service literally miles of new blood vessels. Drop 10 pounds and you'll knock an easy 5 points off your blood pressure, and as a result lower your risk of stroke by 42%.

Here are other ways to fight the "silent killer."

► **DON'T SALT YOUR FOOD.** In a 3-month study at the University of Colorado, 35 people with mild hypertension were split into two groups. One group reduced sodium intake to less than the recommended 2,400 mg a day, and the other did not change salt consumption but exercised regularly. The result? Those who ate less salt saw an average 16-point drop in systolic blood pressure, while study participants who exercised but did not limit salt intake realized just a 5-point drop.

► **STOCK UP ON TEA.** In a 10-year study of more than 1,500 people, scientists at Taiwan's National Cheng Kung University found that drinking 4 oz of green or oolong tea daily can cut the risk of high blood pressure by 46%, and gulping down 20 oz slashes risk by a whopping 65%. Study coauthor Chih-Jen Chang, M.D., surmises that the amino acid theanine in green tea may help keep pressure low by preventing blood-vessel constriction, although the mechanism isn't entirely understood. Start drinking at least a cup a day.

► **EAT MORE POTASSIUM-RICH FOODS.** In a study published in the *Journal of Human Hypertension*, researchers found that prehypertensive patients who added

more potassium to their diets lowered their systolic pressure by 2.5 points and their diastolic by 1.6 points. Potassium helps sweep excess sodium from the circulatory system, causing the blood vessels to dilate. So get your recommended 3,500 mg of potassium daily by eating foods that are rich in potassium. Here are a few for starters: bananas, dried apricots, potatoes, beans, low-sodium V8 juice.

► **SWIM, WALK, OR RUN.** In one of the largest long-term studies on blood-pressure reduction, researchers in Finland followed a group of 17,441 healthy adults for 11 years. The study found that as physical activity increased, the risk of hypertension markedly decreased. Men who were the most physically active showed a 41% reduction compared with men who were the least active. Other studies show that 20 minutes of moderate exercise twice a week will lower blood pressure.

► **LUNCH LIKE A GREEK.** A 5-year study of more than 20,000 nonhypertensive Greeks ages 20 to 86 found that a diet low in saturated fat and red meat but high in olive oil, vegetables, whole grains, beans, fruit, and fish had a dramatic impact on blood pressure. An ideal lunch: salad with chunks of protein-rich tuna, olive oil, tomatoes, and spinach.

► **SQUEEZE A TENNIS BALL.** A study at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, found that isometric hand exercises made blood vessels more elastic, which in turn decreased systolic blood pressure in subjects by 15 points. You should get the same results from squeezing hand grips or a tennis ball, says Maureen MacDonald, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the department of kinesiology at McMaster and lead researcher on the

study. Do four 2-minute sets of contractions three times a week.

► **OR GAZE AT YOUR BELLY.** Searching for inner peace has its benefits. “Look at monastic people, like Buddhist monks: They live long and don’t have high blood pressure,” says cardiologist Thomas D. Giles, M.D., president of the American Society of Hypertension. Two daily 20-minute sessions of Transcendental Meditation (TM), during which you intone a mantra, can lower systolic blood pressure by an average of 10 points, according to a study in the late 1990s that tracked about 200 participants over 9 months. Practitioners of TM sit quietly,

eyes closed, allowing the mind and body to naturally settle.

► **JUST BREATHE.** Job stress isn’t all in your head—it’s in your circulatory system, too. “Long-term stressful situations readjust the blood-pressure set point upward,” says Rollin McCraty, Ph.D., director of research at the HeartMath Institute in Boulder Creek, California. But McCraty has a fix. Retreat to your office and sit quietly while focusing for 10 seconds on the area around your heart. Breathe deeply and try to replace any negative sensation by reexperiencing a positive, fun feeling or event from your past. “Practice doing this 5 to 10 times a day, five times a week,

to achieve a drop in blood pressure,” says McCraty. According to a 3-month study of 38 computer-company employees, that drop could be as much as 10 points systolic and 6 points diastolic.

► **HAVE A DRINK.** In a landmark study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, researchers found that one or two drinks a day actually decreased blood pressure slightly. Three drinks or more a day, however, elevated blood pressure by an average of 10 points systolic and 4 diastolic. Teetotalers can get similar results by drinking grape juice. Compounds found in the skins of Concord grapes can lower blood pressure by an average of 6 points if you drink 12 oz of their juice every day.

► **TAPE-RECORD YOURSELF SLEEPING.** If you snore, you may have a disorder called sleep apnea. It happens when the muscles in the nose and throat relax to the point where your air supply is cut off. Your night becomes a long series of brief awakenings during which you gasp for breath. When you do, your blood pressure spikes.

Studies suggest that this condition can drive your blood pressure up 5 to 10 points, says James Skatrud, M.D., professor and section head of pulmonary and critical care at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine. To tell if you have it, listen to a tape of yourself snoring or have your partner monitor your sleep. If the sound is a steady snore-snore-snore, you’re probably fine. But if it’s more like a series of gasps (as you struggle for breath) followed by periods of silence (as you fall back to sleep), you need to address the problem. Sleeping on your back may be one reason for the apnea—this position allows the relaxed tissues of the nose and

throat to close your upper airway. Alcohol (which over-relaxes the muscles) and too much extra weight are two other potential reasons. If you suspect that you have sleep apnea, talk your doctor.

► **TAKE A STATIN.** Research shows that taking statin drugs, such as Lipitor or Zocor, for cholesterol also leads to a significant reduction in diastolic and systolic blood pressure. The study, conducted at the University of California at San Diego, monitored more than 1,000 men and women with LDL, or “bad,” cholesterol in the acceptable range (meaning they didn’t need statin therapy). When put on statins, their blood pressure decreased. “The findings may help explain the reduced risk of stroke seen with statins,” says Beatrice A. Golomb, M.D., Ph.D., an associate professor of medicine at the university.

► **DON'T RULE OUT BLOOD-PRESSURE MEDS.** Sometimes blood pressure won’t budge no matter how many lifestyle changes you throw at it. Plan B? If you’re still prehypertensive after 6 months of rehabbing your routine, see your doctor about medication.

WHAT YOUR BLOOD-PRESSURE NUMBERS MEAN

READING IT ► Your blood pressure, expressed in millimeters of mercury, consists of two numbers: **Systolic (the top figure)** is the pressure reading for when the heart beats and pushes blood into the arteries. **Diastolic (the bottom figure)** represents the lower pressure when the heart rests between beats. Get your numbers checked twice a year.

LOWER THAN 120/80— Normal blood pressure

120/80 TO 139/89— Prehypertension

140/90 TO 159/99— Stage I hypertension. Moderately high. You’ll have to modify your diet and pick up your exercise regimen. If these don’t control BP, you’ll likely need medications.

160/100 TO 179/109— Stage II hypertension. Very high. Your doctor will prescribe blood-pressure meds.

180/110 OR ABOVE— Danger zone. You’ve increased risk of having a heart attack by two times and stroke by four times.