Actions recommended by my health professional

Stop smoking clinic  Yes / No / Declined / NA
Contact details for local service

Exercise  Yes / No / Declined / NA
Contact details and information on local services

Healthy eating  Yes / No / Declined / NA
Referral to a dietician or contact details for local service

FROM HIGH TO HEALTHY

Six simple steps to lower your blood pressure – and reduce your risk of a stroke.

Stroke Helpline 0845 3033 100  www.stroke.org.uk

The Stroke Association is registered as a charity in England and Wales (No 211015) and in Scotland (SC037769). Also registered in Isle of Man (No 945) Jersey [NPO 363] and in Northern Ireland.

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High blood pressure is the single biggest risk factor for stroke. It causes up to 50% of all strokes.

But it’s possible do something about this. In fact, around 40% of strokes could be prevented if people do just two things:

– have regular blood pressure tests to know what their blood pressure is.
– take healthy lifestyle steps to maintain normal blood pressure.

That’s why The Stroke Association has developed this booklet. It helps you understand high blood pressure, know how to combat it and keep a record of the changes you make to your health and lifestyle as you reduce your risk of stroke.

The Stroke Association also runs a national Know Your Blood Pressure campaign to raise awareness of the link between hypertension and stroke. To find out more, please visit www.stroke.org.uk/kybp or call 01604 687720.
**What is high blood pressure?**

Blood pressure is a measure of how firmly blood presses on the walls of your arteries, as it’s pumped around the body by your heart.

Most people who have high blood pressure don’t realise, as there may not be any symptoms. The only way to find out is to have it measured. To do this, two pressure readings are taken.

The first as the heart beats (systolic pressure), and the second when the heart relaxes between beats (diastolic pressure). The first reading will always be higher. Both are measured in millimetres of mercury, written as ‘mmHg’.

**The normal adult blood pressure ranges between 120/80 to less than 140/90.** If your reading is consistently over 140/90 (or 130/80 if you have diabetes), you will be considered to have high blood pressure or hypertension.

**How do I get my blood pressure checked?**

To get these readings, you need to visit your GP (or another health professional, such as a pharmacist). Remember, there aren’t necessarily any symptoms, so if you have no underlying health conditions, you should get your blood pressure taken at least once every five years as a matter of routine. Women on the contraceptive pill or hormone replacement therapy should also have their blood pressure monitored regularly. If you are on blood pressure medication you should be checked at least twice a year.

When three separate readings show raised blood pressure (above 140/90), that’s usually taken as confirmation of sustained high blood pressure. Once this diagnosis has been made, your GP will discuss prescribing blood pressure medication and ask you to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

If your blood pressure is just under 140/90 (pre-hypertension), your GP will ask you to make healthy lifestyle changes to bring it down to a healthy level. You will not normally need any medication.

**Checklist** Sometimes when we visit the GP we don’t always remember what to ask. It may be worth reading this list, writing down the questions you may want answered, and taking a list to your next appointment.

- Why do I have high blood pressure?
- What do the numbers mean?
- How can my high blood pressure be treated?
- Will I be on medication?
- How often do I need to have my blood pressure checked?
- Can I use complementary therapies?
- What can I do to reduce my blood pressure?
- Do I need my cholesterol checked?
- Where can I get more information?
- Are there any local services that can help me?
What’s the link to stroke?

High blood pressure puts a strain on blood vessels all over the body, including vital arteries to the brain.

The excess pressure can damage the lining of an artery, allowing blood clots to form and cause blockages. It can contribute to arteries furring, making them more vulnerable to being blocked by blood clots. The extra strain may also cause blood vessels to burst, and lead to bleeding into the brain.

When a clot forms a blockage or a blood vessel bursts in the brain, it causes a stroke.

A clot blocking the artery:  Bleed on the brain:

What causes high blood pressure?

Some of things that cause high blood pressure are unavoidable. But others can be controlled through small but significant changes to diet, physical activity and general lifestyle.

Things you can’t change

- Your age. Older people are more likely to develop high blood pressure.
- Your ethnic group. High blood pressure is more common in some people of certain ethnic groups, such as those of African-Caribbean origin. Stroke rates are also higher in those of South Asian origin.
- Your family history. High blood pressure can run in families.
- Your gender. Men are more likely to develop high blood pressure.
- Existing conditions, such as type 2 diabetes or heart disease. They can increase your risk of stroke.

Things you can change

- Being overweight.
- Drinking too much alcohol.
- Smoking. It can double your risk of a stroke.
- Eating too much salt. Adults shouldn’t have more than 6g a day – about a teaspoonful.
- Not doing enough physical activity.
- Being stressed.

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What can I do about it?
Here are the six main things we can all do to reduce our chances of high blood pressure, and thus risk of a stroke.

1 Eat healthily

It’s important to have a nutritious and balanced diet. A healthy diet includes the right balance of:

- Starchy foods including wholemeal pastas, bread and potatoes
- Fruit and vegetables. Remember five portions a day
- Meat, fish, eggs and pulses/beans
- Milk and dairy products
- Foods with fats and sugars
- Foods with low salt content

Healthy eating isn’t about faddy diets, or completely cutting out a particular type of food. It’s about balanced and nutritious meals with healthy portion sizes. Try and make small and gradual changes to what you eat, instead of trying to do too much too quickly. You could try keeping a food diary of what you eat every day – see the back of this booklet.

Get the right balance

Fruit & vegetables 33%  
Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta 33%
Meat, fish, eggs, beans 12%  
Food & drink high in fat/sugar 8%  
Milk & dairy 15%

Amounts add up to 101% due to rounding up.

2 Do some physical activity

You don’t have to join a gym or run a marathon!
Where possible, aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise every day. This could include walking, housework or gardening, and could be spread throughout the day. Try to make changes gradually and incorporate them in your daily routine.

If you’re not sure where to start, try walking clubs: they’re free, and being with others can make it easier to join in, make friends and support and encourage one another. For clubs near you, try your local authority website or local library, or Walking for Health www.wfh.naturalengland.org.uk in England, Paths For All www.pathsforall.org.uk in Scotland, Let’s Walk Cymru www.ww2h.org.uk in Wales, and for Northern Ireland contact your local council.

You can also contact your local leisure services.

Discounts for people over 60 or with disabilities, plus family concessions.

And don’t forget things around the house are also forms of physical activity, such as climbing stairs or cleaning the car. It doesn’t matter what you do, as long as it warms you up and makes you feel slightly out of breath.

Exercise on prescription

Some GPs have agreements with local leisure services to provide exercise on prescription for people with conditions such as high blood pressure, or because they’re overweight. Ask your GP whether there’s a local agreement, and whether you’d qualify.