Blood Pressure

Information for people with high blood pressure, and for their family and friends
This booklet is not intended as a substitute for the advice your doctor may give you based on his or her knowledge of your condition.

This booklet is for people with high blood pressure, and for their family and friends. It explains:

- what high blood pressure is
- why it is so important to bring your blood pressure down to a normal level, and
- what you can do to help lower your blood pressure.

It also describes the tablets that can be used to help lower your blood pressure.

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But I don’t feel ill!

High blood pressure - hypertension - rarely makes people feel ill. In a very small number of people it can cause headaches, but only if the blood pressure is very high.

Problems with sight, breathlessness and nosebleeds can sometimes be a sign of hypertension. But the only way of knowing if you have high blood pressure is to have it measured.

Why is high blood pressure harmful?

The fact is that the higher your blood pressure, the shorter your life expectancy. People with high blood pressure run a higher risk of having a stroke (which damages the brain) or a heart attack. If left untreated for a long time, high blood pressure can lead to kidney failure and even damage your sight. It can also cause the heart to become abnormally large and less efficient (left ventricular hypertrophy). This can lead to heart failure, and further increase the risk of having a heart attack.

If you have high blood pressure, reducing your blood pressure by 5mmHg can reduce your risk of having a heart attack by about 20%.

Why me?

You’re not alone! Nearly one in four adults in the UK has high blood pressure. But you are luckier than many because at least you know you have it. Over a third of people with high blood pressure are not being treated and their health is at risk.
What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure means the pressure of the blood in your arteries - the tubes that take the blood away from your heart to the rest of your body. A certain amount of pressure is needed to keep the blood flowing. High blood pressure happens if the walls of the larger arteries lose their natural elasticity and become rigid, and the smaller vessels constrict (become narrower).

Your heart is a pump that beats by contracting and then relaxing. The pressure of your blood flowing through the arteries varies at different times in the heartbeat cycle. The highest pressure (known as systolic pressure) occurs when the beat or contraction of your heart forces your blood around your circulation. The lowest pressure (diastolic pressure) occurs between heartbeats.

Blood pressure is measured in millimetres of mercury (abbreviated to ‘mmHg’). A blood pressure reading gives two numbers. The first number is the systolic pressure and the second is the diastolic pressure. (For information on how blood pressure is measured, see page 11.)

Normal blood pressure for adults is generally taken to be below 160/90 (160 systolic and 90 diastolic). However, if you already have coronary heart disease, your target blood pressure is below 140/85. If you have diabetes, your target is below 130/80. However, there is no fixed dividing line between normal blood pressure and slightly raised blood pressure. How these 'borderline' pressure levels are regarded varies between doctors.
What causes high blood pressure?

In over nine out of ten people there is no single underlying cause of high blood pressure. This condition is known as ‘essential hypertension’. The following can all contribute:

- being overweight or obese
- excessive salt intake
- drinking too much alcohol, and
- physical inactivity.

Genes also play a part. So if one or both of your parents have or had hypertension, you have a greater chance of having it too.

In a very small number of people, a single cause is found, such as narrowing of the artery to a kidney or abnormal production of hormones from the adrenal glands. Severe kidney disease can also cause high blood pressure.

Occasionally, some tablets used to treat ulcers, arthritis or depression may cause a rise in blood pressure. So, when buying over-the-counter medicines, it is important to tell your pharmacist that you have high blood pressure. And always tell your doctor about any medicines or herbal remedies that you take.

What tests will I have?

Your doctor has probably examined your chest and looked generally for signs that show the health of your circulation. This includes looking at your eyes with an ophthalmoscope to see whether the blood vessels of your retina have been affected by the high pressure.

If you have hypertension, your doctor may also do simple blood and urine tests to discover whether there is a particular cause. These can also show whether your high blood pressure has caused any damage to your kidneys. You may also have an electrocardiogram or ECG (a test to record the rhythm and electrical activity of your heart), a chest X-ray and a kidney test called an ‘intravenous pyelogram’.