high blood pressure
hypertension

pressure
Hypertension is high blood pressure. But you might hear people refer to it as ‘blood pressure’ or simply as ‘pressure’.

Anyone can develop high blood pressure. Often it has no obvious cause, and it can run in families. It can also be caused by certain medical conditions. Blood pressure also rises as you get older.

High blood pressure is more common among Caribbean people. No one is sure why, but it is probably due to a combination of factors, such as heredity, weight, and high levels of salt in food.

This booklet gives you up-to-date information and advice on a wide range of topics, including:

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How do I know if I’ve got high blood pressure? You may not know. You may feel perfectly well. High blood pressure usually causes no symptoms and generally goes undiscovered until a doctor happens to take your blood pressure, often in the course of a routine medical examination or during a screening check. Very high blood pressure that is left untreated may cause headache, dizziness, blurred vision and possibly breathlessness on exertion. If high blood pressure runs in your family, then you are more at risk of developing it yourself.

The only way to be sure whether or not you have high blood pressure is to go and have it checked by your GP or a nurse. Ring up the practice and ask for an appointment.

How often should I have it checked? From the age of 30 you should try and make sure your blood pressure is checked at least every two years. If you have a family history of high blood pressure, or you know your pressure has been high in the past, go more often, about once a year.

Why can’t I just live with it? High blood pressure can cause serious health problems. If you have high blood pressure you are much more likely to suffer a stroke. You are also more at risk of heart attack, kidney damage or kidney failure. High blood pressure may also damage your eyes.
If I have diabetes does this increase my risk? High blood pressure and diabetes often go together, and that can pose a serious risk to your health. Having both conditions increases your risk of organ damage. Twice as many Caribbean people have diabetes as the general population, yet among Caribbean people there are three times more deaths from diabetes. Forty per cent of Caribbean people with high blood pressure also have diabetes.

If I have got high blood pressure, what will the doctor do? The doctor will probably ask many simple questions about you and your family. You can expect to be examined, and the doctor may take blood and urine samples for testing. This will be to check if any damage has been caused to the heart or kidneys.

If your condition is mild, the doctor may discuss ways of tackling the problem through changes in your diet and lifestyle. However, if your blood pressure is very high, or remains high in spite of following the doctor’s advice, you may need drug treatment.

What can I do to help myself? A healthy lifestyle can help prevent high blood pressure. If your blood pressure is already slightly raised, there’s a lot you can do to help lower it through changes in your lifestyle and diet. Also, healthy living may reduce the need for drug treatment. The help and support of your family and friends will be really valuable.

Cut down your smoking If you have high blood pressure, smoking increases your risk of stroke and heart problems. It’s important to give up. Your GP or practice nurse will give you advice on how to do this.

Watch your weight If you are overweight you are more at risk of high blood pressure. To find the weight that is right for your health, check the chart on p. 7. Try and control your weight by becoming more physically active and through healthy eating. Cut down on the amount of fat and carbohydrate that you eat. Your GP or practice nurse may be able to help.

Keep fit Regular physical activity is a good way to keep your weight down, lower your blood pressure and strengthen your heart. Find something you enjoy doing, such as walking, swimming, dancing or gardening. Take the stairs rather than the lift. Get off the bus a couple of stops earlier. Don’t use the car for short trips. Keeping fit or finding new interests will also help you to reduce stress.

Some forms of exercise such as body building, weightlifting and press-ups are not good for blood pressure. If you have high blood pressure it is best to avoid these types of exercises. Check with your doctor if you are unsure.
**What is a healthy diet?**
For most people, a healthy, balanced diet means eating more bread, breakfast cereals, potatoes, pasta, rice and more fruit and vegetables. Above all, aim for variety in your food.

**Do I need to cut down on salt?**
Yes. Many tinned and processed foods contain a lot of salt, so check labels for salt (sodium) content and avoid foods where the content is high compared to other foods. Many seasonings such as salt and fish seasonings and sauces are also high in salt. Spices and herbs offer a healthy, tasty alternative.

**How to use the chart (opposite)**
The example highlighted refers to a person who is 5'7" tall and weighs 13 stone. That person is overweight.

**Drink less alcohol**
Drinking heavily can raise your blood pressure. Keep your drinking as moderate as possible. Three units of alcohol a day for men, or two units for women, is a sensible level. (One unit of alcohol = half-pint of beer or a small glass of wine or a single pub measure of spirit.)

**What is a healthy diet?**
Make sure there's a good balance in your diet. Avoid fatty foods like butter, full-fat milk, fried foods, cakes and biscuits as much as possible. Poly- or mono-unsaturated oils such as sunflower oil are better than saturated oils like coconut or palm oil.

Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, white meat (chicken), pasta and rice. Whole wheat bread, wholegrain cereals such as oats, and starchy vegetables like yam and sweet potato are good. Pulses like black-eyed, gungo and red kidney beans will give you plenty of fibre.

**Is it important to cut down on salt?**
Definitely. Too much salt in your diet can push up your blood pressure. Try not to add salt to your food, and avoid it in cooking. If you use salt to pre-season food there is no need to add it during cooking. Also try and cut down on very salty foods like salt fish and salt meat, or prepare them by soaking overnight and then boiling in two or three changes of water to reduce the salt.
Can I take traditional remedies instead of drugs? Some people find that traditional remedies like herbal or 'bush' teas help them to feel calm. Herbal practitioners also recommend garlic as a remedy for lowering blood pressure. However, there's no scientific evidence that these actually reduce blood pressure. If you decide to try such remedies, it is important to tell your doctor, because it may affect the treatment your doctor has prescribed for you. You should never take a herbal remedy instead of your prescribed drugs.

If I need medication, what drugs might I be given? A wide range of drugs are available to treat high blood pressure. Your doctor will discuss with you what treatment is right for you.

Will there be side effects? Some drugs might cause symptoms such as dizziness, tiredness, headaches or skin rashes. It's very important to tell the doctor if you experience anything like this, because it might mean the treatment is not right for you.

Don't stop treatment because of side effects without telling your doctor – this might be dangerous. Tell your doctor about any side effects you feel.

If I feel well, why should I take drugs that make me feel bad? This can be hard to accept. Remember that these drugs are being prescribed to control a condition that could otherwise make you seriously ill in the future. Once the right treatment has been found for you, you should be able to lead a perfectly normal, active life.

Will I have to take these drugs for the rest of my life? High blood pressure can't be cured, it can only be controlled. So yes, you will probably have to take the drugs for the rest of your life. If you stop, your blood pressure will rise again.

However, if you live a healthy lifestyle, this will help control your high blood pressure and may reduce the amount of drugs you need to take.

What if my high blood pressure is due to the pill? Some forms of the contraceptive pill are known to raise blood pressure. If this is likely to be a problem for you, your doctor can advise on other methods of birth control. You could also go to a family planning clinic for advice. It's important to have regular health check-ups while you are on the pill.

Are women particularly at risk of high blood pressure? If a woman is taking the pill for contraception, in a very few cases this can cause high blood pressure. Blood pressure can rise during pregnancy, although the level usually returns to normal after the birth.

Also, women tend to put on more weight than men, particularly as they get older, and this can increase the risk of high blood pressure.

What if my high blood pressure is caused by pregnancy? If your blood pressure rises when you are pregnant, you may notice that your hands or feet swell. When you go for your ante-natal checks, the doctor or nurse may find traces of protein in your urine.

Try and maintain a healthy lifestyle and make sure you attend ante-natal appointments where your blood pressure can be checked. If you do notice any swelling, or you are in any doubt, always consult your doctor.

Your blood pressure should return to normal after your baby is born, but your doctor will probably keep checking to make sure.