

## Diet to Stop Hypertension

Even though hypertension (high blood pressure) is almost always asymptomatic (can't be felt), it is the leading cause of stroke, and a leading cause of heart disease and kidney failure as well. So if you are prescribed medication for hypertension, you certainly should take it.

But if my patients are representative of the rest of you, you would probably prefer not to take medication. The good news is, you might not have to. The latest evidence from the DASH study (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) demonstrates very convincingly how effective dietary management of hypertension can be.

There has long been controversy regarding the role of salt, or sodium, in hypertension. Long thought to contribute to high blood pressure, salt was found to do so in only a minority of people with hypertension. The DASH trial, however, has now provided data that show a relationship between salt intake and blood pressure in both hypertensive and normotensive individuals. In other words, every one can benefit from a salt-restricted diet.

The DASH diet is not just based on salt restriction. The investigators looked at the total dietary pattern. They found that a diet based primarily on whole grains, fruits and vegetables, with non-fat or low-fat

dairy included, was the best pattern for lowering blood pressure. When this dietary pattern was combined with restriction of dietary salt, it performed even better. Those subjects with high blood pressure who received the DASH diet and salt restriction had drops in systolic pressure (the top number) of as much as 10 points or more and comparable declines in diastolic blood pressure. This magnitude of effect is comparable to low-dose medication. So the message is clear: the right dietary pattern can, in many cases, substitute for medication in the management and prevention of hypertension and its complications.

But what exactly is that dietary pattern, and how does one achieve it? As noted, the diet should be based primarily on grains, fruits and vegetables. Good choices for breakfast include hot or cold cereals with skim milk, fruit, fruit juice, no-fat yogurt, all-fruit preserves, and/or whole grain breads. Avoid breakfast meats such as bacon, fatty muffins, donuts, and high-fat spreads.

Lunch should be salads with low or non-fat dressings, vegetarian soups or stews, pasta salad, lean turkey or chicken sandwiches, vegetarian sandwiches, tuna (without mayonnaise, or with low-fat mayonnaise) salads or sandwiches, or again non-fat yogurt with fruit and cereal.



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Good snack foods include dried fruit, fresh fruit, non-fat yogurt, whole grain breads, non-fat whole grain crackers, fresh vegetables (such as pre-washed baby carrots), baked chips (Guiltless Gourmet has an excellent product line), air-popped pop corn, rice cakes, among others.

Good dinner choices include lean poultry (without skin) or fish that is baked, grilled, poached, or broiled; pasta with vegetarian sauces; bean or lentil dishes, such as soups, stews, or salads; seafood dishes; vegetable salads; and generous portions of vegetables and grains such as rice, couscous, barley, or cracked wheat.

The new results of the DASH study suggest that a sodium intake of approximately 1500 mg per day or less, half the average intake in the US, is optimal. To achieve this, eat largely unprocessed foods (again, fresh fruits, vegetables, and grains). When choosing processed foods, check the sodium content on the nutrition label and avoid foods with 200 mg or more of sodium. Choose foods that are salt free and salt reduced.

Eating the DASH diet is not difficult and can provide enormous health benefit, including the avoidance of blood pressure medication in some cases. For more

advice on this diet, call the Prevention Research Center at (203) 732-1265.

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*Preventive Medicine Column*

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