

Chapter 1 Conquering Hypertension and Heart Disease – the DASH Diet Plan

When you were a child, your grandmother probably told you to drink your milk, eat your fruits and vegetables, and go outside and play. This is still great advice, and shows that our fundamental ideas of good nutrition hold up over time.

The DASH diet is a “new” healthy eating plan, that has been proven to help reduce blood pressure. It was developed in major research studies funded by the National Institutes of Health, as the “Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension” (DASH). It is a diet based on the same great advice that our grandmother’s generation lived by, which somehow, today’s Americans seem to have forgotten.

When you follow the DASH plan, you will eat lots of fruits and vegetables, along with low fat dairy foods, lean meat, poultry, and fish, nuts and beans, and whole grains. The plan is low in saturated fat

What is a Diet?

A diet is not just a plan for losing weight, a diet refers to the way that we eat. Any eating pattern is a diet.

and cholesterol, it has a moderate amount of protein, and is rich in vitamins, minerals and fiber.

In addition to lower blood pressure, a diet based on the DASH foods is associated with lower risk of heart disease, stroke, and cancer. The DASH diet can support reaching and maintaining a healthy weight. No conflicting information, no magic combinations, no forbidden foods – just fabulous healthy eating.

Understanding Blood Pressure

Over 50 million Americans have high blood pressure. It is the leading cause of heart attacks and strokes. If your blood pressure goes too low you may feel lightheaded. If it goes too high there might not be any symptoms, or it could trigger a stroke. If blood pressure remains high, it can lead to congestive heart failure, kidney failure, hardening of the arteries, stroke, and other complications.

You might not have learned that you had high blood pressure until your physician detected it in a routine physical exam. You probably had no symptoms. You may not be able to detect that your blood pressure is high unless you check it on a regular basis. Since you often don't feel that anything is wrong, you might not keep it as well controlled as your physician would like. This is one of the reasons that hypertension has been called the "silent killer."

Our blood pressure is composed of 2 numbers. Systolic is the “top” number and diastolic is the “bottom” number. If our blood pressure is “120 over 80,” the 120 is the systolic pressure, and 80 is the diastolic.

Blood Pressure Definitions

Normal: Systolic 90-119 and diastolic 60-79.

Prehypertension: Systolic 120-139 and diastolic 80-89.

Stage I hypertension: Systolic 140-159 and/or diastolic 90-99.

Stage II hypertension: Systolic 160 or higher and/or diastolic 100 or greater.

Blood pressure is considered to be high (hypertension) if systolic is higher than 140, or if diastolic is more than 90. (Your physician might consider you to have high blood pressure at slightly lower numbers, if there are other medical complications to consider.) A new category of “prehypertension” has been identified as systolic blood pressure between 120-139, or diastolic 80 - 90. When blood pressure is high, it forces our heart to beat harder to move the blood against more pressure and can cause premature hardening or other damage to the arteries.

High blood pressure is not an equal opportunity disease. Men are at higher risk than women with the same blood pressure. Blacks and older people will also be at higher risk than non-blacks or younger people with the same blood pressure readings. This