

# **High Blood Pressure: Learning to Live Without It**

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*What is the epidemic condition that causes more death and disability in industrialized countries than any other?*

*What is the leading reason for visits to doctors and the single biggest justification for drug prescriptions?*

*What condition affects the majority of Americans over the age of 65, often has no symptoms and is referred to as the “silent killer”?*

*If you said high blood pressure, also known as hypertension, you would be correct.*

## **Blood Pressure Basics**

Blood pressure measurements are recorded as two distinct numbers, the first one over the second. The top number is called the systolic blood pressure and this number represents the pressure of the blood in the vessels during the heart's contraction. The bottom number, or diastolic blood pressure, represents the pressure of the blood in the vessels when the heart relaxes.

Both measurements are important risk factors that are associated with your risk of morbidity and mortality. That means your risk of becoming ill or dead.

For every point your systolic blood pressure rises over 90 there is a one percent increased risk of mortality. Looked at positively, this means that for every point you drop your systolic blood pressure all the way down to 90, there is a one percent reduction in mortality. Therefore, an individual who successfully reduces his/her systolic blood pressure from 150 to 110 through improved dietary and lifestyle habits would reduce their risk of all cause mortality by a whopping 40 percent. Said simply, this means that if you reduce your systolic blood pressure by 40 points, you are 40% less likely to die this year.

## **Blood Pressure Matters**

When blood pressure is elevated the increased wear and tear on the blood vessels and the turbulence created in the bloodstream appears to increase the tendency to form fatty sores called plaques. When these plaques rupture they may lead to a blockage of the blood vessels that feed circulation to the heart or brain resulting in a heart attack or stroke. These incidents are the leading cause of death in industrialized countries.

Interestingly, the majority of heart attacks and strokes that result from increased blood pressure occur in individuals whose blood pressure is not yet elevated high enough to justify the significant risks of medications. All blood pressure medications are known to have significant risks and side effects. These side effects are so dangerous that until blood pressures are significantly elevated (greater than 160 mm/Hg in most patients) the risks of medications outweigh the potential benefit.

Fortunately there are many options other than drugs that work to safely lower blood pressure, thereby reducing the risk of premature death and disability.

### **What works**

Numerous approaches have been scientifically proven to be safe and effective at lowering blood pressure. For example, for every Kg of weight loss (2.2 pounds), systolic blood pressure is reduced an average of 1.6 points. The adoption of a vegetarian high fiber diet will also reduce systolic blood pressure, by an average of 2.8 points. Also, and very significantly, the reduction of alcohol and sodium will reduce systolic blood pressure by 4.8 and 16 points respectively. It is interesting to note that the 16 point reduction from severe sodium restriction is actually a larger effect size than would be expected from any combination of medications. Exercise has additionally been shown to have a powerful normalizing effect on blood pressure. For example, a regular walking program of 45 minutes, 4-5 times a week may reduce blood pressure by an average of about 7 points.

### **Water-Only Fasting and Blood Pressure**

In a study conducted at the TrueNorth Health Center in California and published in the June 2001 issue of the Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics, the use of water-only fasting followed by a low-fat, low-salt vegan diet demonstrated the largest effect on lowering blood pressure of any study in the scientific literature (See Figure 2). The average drop in systolic blood pressure in 174 consecutive patients was 37 points. In those patients with higher levels of blood pressure, starting at what is called Stage 3 hypertension (where the systolic blood pressure exceeds 180 points or 180 mm/Hg), the average reduction was 60 points!

In a second study, also conducted at the TrueNorth Health Center and published in the October 2002 issue of the Journal of Alternative and Complimentary Medicine, a group of 68 patients with "borderline" high blood pressure (systolic blood pressure between 120 and 140 mm Hg) underwent a period of water-only fasting for an average of two weeks. The average reduction in blood pressure exceeded 20 points, resulting in a final average blood pressure of 96/67. This is a level similar to that level suspected to be optimum blood pressure by Dr. Richard Peto of Oxford and other authorities.

### **Worth Getting Healthy**

In 2001, California's largest labor union, The International Union of Operating Engineers, elected to make the TrueNorth Health residential health education program a fully covered medical benefit offered to all active and retired union members and their families that suffer with high blood pressure or diabetes. This represents the first time in history that a major medical payer has agreed to provide water-only fasting as a fully covered medical benefit.

The Operating Engineers Union is self-insured and all information concerning medical expenses is centralized. This has allowed us to accurately evaluate the effect of the fasting program on the cost of medical treatment and drugs in the year prior to, and the year after, participation in the TrueNorth Health program. The results have been clinically and economically impressive (See Tables 1 and 2). The cost of medical and drug treatment was reduced an average of over \$2800 per member in the first year alone. This cost savings exceeded the cost of the program,

demonstrating that fasting can be both clinically and economically effective. TrueNorth Health Center will continue to track the outcomes of the Union members in the years to come, and we expect the long term results to be outstanding.

### **Feeding after the fast**

The effect of fasting on blood pressure can seem like a miracle, as patients who have been told that they need to take medications “for the rest of your life” are able to throw those medications away. However, in order to sustain the results requires compliance with a health promoting lifestyle, including proper diet, sleep, and exercise habits.

With respect to diet, we instruct our patients to avoid all processed foods that contain added salt, including bread, cheese, highly salted salad dressings, soups, sauces, soda, as well as the use of coffee, alcohol and chocolate. In place of a conventional American diet, we encourage a diet derived exclusively from whole, minimally processed foods including fruits, vegetables, unprocessed whole grains, beans, and raw nuts and seeds.

Breakfast is often fresh fruit and/or oatmeal with some ground flax seeds. Lunch is often a large raw vegetable salad, with steamed vegetables and minimally processed carbohydrates including steamed or baked potatoes, yams, squash etc. Dinner may include another large raw vegetable salad, more steamed vegetables and rice, millet, or a dish out of *The Health Promoting Cookbook*.\*

By avoiding all meat, fish, fowl, eggs and dairy products as well as all foods with added oil, flour, salt and sugar, our patients eliminate the dietary excess that is a contributing cause of high blood pressure. When combined with a program of proper sleep and exercise, the results are consistently outstanding. By utilizing fasting to jump start a new way of living, patients are able to break bad habits, and to gain control of their health. High blood pressure is just one of many major health concerns that can be successfully treated with this approach. And it is one that you can definitely learn to live without!

Visit Dr. Goldhamer’s web site at [www.healthpromoting.com](http://www.healthpromoting.com) for more information about his work.

“Although a blood pressure of 120/80\* is considered “normal,” a healthier blood pressure is 110/70 and optimum blood pressure is probably closer to 90/60.”

\*Blood pressure numbers are given here as “points” without the associated terminology as “millimeters of mercury,” indicated by “mm Hg.” The correct way to technically describe blood pressure of 120/80 is “120/80 mm/Hg.”