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Blood Pressure

Blood pressure measures the force of blood that presses against your artery walls when your heart beats. Your body depends on healthy blood pressure to deliver oxygen and nutrients to your organs and tissues. High blood pressure (hypertension) is often called the “silent killer” because you may feel fine even when your blood pressure is dangerously high. Consistently high blood pressure can damage your arteries and increase your risk of heart attack, stroke, kidney disease, and vision problems.

Blood pressure is expressed as two numbers: systolic (top number) over diastolic (bottom number). The American Heart Association recommends the following blood pressure targets:

Blood Pressure Ranges

- Normal: Less than 120/80 mm Hg
- Elevated: Systolic between 120-129 and diastolic less than 80 mm Hg
- High (Stage 1 Hypertension): 130-139 systolic or 80-89 diastolic
- High (Stage 2 Hypertension): 140 or higher systolic, or 90 or higher diastolic.

Monitoring your blood pressure regularly is one way to protect your heart health. Many pharmacies have free machines for public use, and home blood pressure monitors are widely available and affordable. Before measuring your blood pressure, sit quietly for about five minutes. It is best to avoid caffeine, alcohol, and smoking for at least 30 minutes before testing. When taking your blood pressure, rest your arm at heart level and remember to keep your feet flat on the floor with your legs uncrossed. Be aware that talking, stress, a full bladder, and wearing tight clothing can also interfere with accuracy. Taking multiple readings over a few days can help you identify trends.

These are some simple ways to manage your blood pressure and protect your heart:

- **Eat healthy:** Focus on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy
- **Limit sodium:** Keep intake under 2,300 mg daily
- **Stay active:** Aim for 150 minutes of moderate exercise weekly, like brisk walking or cycling
- **Drink responsibly:** Consume alcohol in moderation
- **Quit smoking:** Seek support to stop if you smoke
- **Manage stress:** Practice mindfulness, deep breathing (e.g., 4-7-8 method), or relaxation techniques. Learn more from trusted resources

If your blood pressure readings are consistently high, if you experience any symptoms of hypertension, such as a headache or changes in vision, or if you have a family history of heart disease, speak with a healthcare provider to determine which lifestyle strategies are the best fit for you. Medication may be necessary in some cases, but early intervention through lifestyle changes can often make a meaningful difference.



Sodium Awareness

Sodium is an essential mineral that plays a significant role in many chemical reactions in your body. It helps maintain fluid balance, supports nerve transmission, and contributes to proper muscle function, including the contraction of your heart. Your body needs sodium to survive, but too much of it can also lead to health concerns. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans suggest that adults limit sodium to no more than 2,300 milligrams (mg) per day. However, the average American typically consumes more than 3,400 mg daily.

Excess dietary sodium is linked to serious health conditions like hypertension (high blood pressure) which is one of the leading risk factors for heart disease and stroke. High blood pressure often develops without noticeable symptoms, making it difficult to identify without monitoring your blood pressure. Over time, elevated blood pressure puts strain on your arteries, heart, and kidneys, increasing your risk of heart attack, stroke, and kidney disease. Even moderately high sodium intake can raise your blood pressure, especially if you have a family history of high blood pressure or are over the age of 40. In contrast, consuming too little sodium, which is commonly seen with restrictive diets or excessive sweating, can lead to symptoms such as fatigue, muscle cramps, nausea, and even confusion.

Sodium naturally occurs in many foods, but the majority of sodium in American diets comes from processed and packaged foods like these:

- Canned soups
- Deli meats, bacon, and cured meats

- Frozen and boxed meals
- Seasoning packets
- Restaurants and fast food
- Bread, rolls, and tortillas
- Sauces, salad dressings, and condiments
- Cheese
- Snack foods like chips or crackers

To better manage sodium in your diet, start by reading nutrition labels and choosing products labeled “low sodium” or “no added salt.” The Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) Diet has also been shown to help reduce blood pressure and improve cardiovascular health.

To keep your blood pressure in check, choose lower-sodium snack options like unsalted air-popped popcorn, raw vegetables, roasted chickpeas, and fresh fruit. Cooking more meals at home also gives you more control over how much sodium you consume. Being aware of the sources of sodium in your diet can help you make better choices to protect your heart and lower your risk of cardiovascular disease.



Cholesterol-Lowering Strategies

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance made in your liver. It plays a key role in hormone production, digestion, and building cell membranes. However, when your blood contains too much cholesterol—especially the low-density lipoprotein (LDL) type, sometimes called “bad” cholesterol—it can build up on the walls of your arteries. This narrowing makes it more difficult for blood to pass through and increases your risk of heart disease. Like high blood pressure, high cholesterol can happen quietly, meaning you may not experience any symptoms until a serious event occurs.

According to the American Heart Association guidelines, a healthy total cholesterol level is less than 200 mg/dL, with LDL cholesterol ideally below 100 mg/dL and high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or “good” cholesterol, at 60 mg/dL or higher.

If your total cholesterol level and/or LDL cholesterol levels are too high, you may be able to lower your numbers with lifestyle changes. The most effective lifestyle strategies involve a mix of dietary changes, consistent physical activity, and weight management.

Effective strategies for lowering cholesterol include:

- Eating soluble fiber (oats, beans, lentils, fruits, and vegetables)
- Limiting saturated fats (red meat, full-fat dairy, and fried foods)
- Reducing or eliminating trans fats (processed and packaged foods)
- Increasing physical activity to at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise each week

- Maintaining a healthy weight or losing excess body fat if needed
- Quitting smoking and limiting alcohol intake
- Continuing to work with your doctor to determine the best treatment options

However, in cases where lifestyle changes alone are not effective, work with your primary care provider to discuss other options, such as medications. Statins are a commonly prescribed medication that blocks a substance your liver needs to make cholesterol. These medications also cause your liver to remove excess cholesterol from your blood, which helps to lower LDL levels. Ezetimibe is another medication that reduces cholesterol absorption in the intestine. Some people also see benefits from dietary supplements like plant sterols, soluble fiber, or omega-3 fatty acids, although these should be used only after consulting with your healthcare provider.

Your daily choices have a powerful effect on your health. In many cases, improvements can be seen within just a few weeks or months of making consistent changes.

ORANGE-ROSEMARY ROASTED CHICKEN

Dietitian's tip:

Rosemary has an appealing piney flavor. It can be used to season a variety of foods, including roasted vegetables and mushrooms, and even ripe melon. Use it with care, however. Too much can be overpowering.

Ingredients

- 3 skinless, bone-in chicken breast halves, each 8 ounces
- 3 skinless, bone-in chicken legs with thigh pieces, each 8 ounces
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 1/2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 teaspoons fresh rosemary or 1 teaspoon dried rosemary, minced
- 1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/3 cup orange juice

Instructions

1. Heat the oven to 450°F. Lightly coat a baking pan with cooking spray.
2. Rub each piece of chicken with garlic. Dab fingers in oil and rub with oil, and sprinkle with rosemary and pepper. Place the chicken pieces in the baking dish. Pour the orange juice over the chicken. Cover and bake for 30 minutes. Using tongs, turn the chicken and return to the oven until browned, about 10 to 15 minutes longer. Baste the chicken with the orange juice from the pan as needed to prevent it from drying out.
3. Transfer the chicken to individual serving plates. Spoon orange juice from the pan over the top of the chicken and serve immediately.

Servings:
6



Nutrition Facts

Calories: 204
Total fat: 8 g
Saturated fat: 2 g
Monounsaturated fat: 4 g
Cholesterol: 118 mg
Sodium: 95 mg
Total carbohydrate: 2 g
Total sugars: 1 g
Added sugars: 0 g
Protein: 31 g



Know Your Numbers by Heart

Take your blood pressure at least three different times over the next week. If your blood pressure is above the target range advised by your healthcare provider, track your sodium intake to see if there is a correlation between your diet and your blood pressure. Even if you do not have hypertension, taking your blood pressure between doctor visits can help you identify concerns earlier. To identify patterns, track the amount of sodium you consumed, or simply make a few notes about the types of food you ate that day. Also consider how stress or other factors may have contributed to fluctuations in your blood pressure.

Employer Completion Form

I, _____, successfully completed the Know Your Numbers by Heart Challenge by:

Signed: _____ Date: _____

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Your Challenge

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS BY HEART

Check Your Blood Pressure: Take your blood pressure at least three different times over the next week. If your blood pressure is above the target range advised by your healthcare provider, track your sodium intake to see if there is a correlation between your diet and your blood pressure. Even if you do not have hypertension, taking your blood pressure between doctor visits can help you identify concerns earlier. To identify patterns, track the amount of sodium in your diet, or simply make a few notes about the types of food you ate that day. Also consider how stress or other factors may have contributed to fluctuations in your blood pressure.

- **HOW LOW SHOULD YOU GO?**

Confirm your target blood pressure with your healthcare provider.

- **SHAKE THE SALT HABIT**

Choose lower-sodium snacks, hide the salt shaker, and limit how often you eat fast food.

- **GET TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

Don't let stress build up. Instead, address issues before they become bigger problems.

- **DASH TOWARD PLANTS**

Look for Dietary Approaches Against Hypertension (DASH) Diet recipes that include a wide variety of fruits and vegetables.

- **TRY NEW FLAVORS**

Use natural flavor-enhancers like fresh herbs, lemon, garlic, vinegar, and salt-free spice blends.



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