



# Food as Health for High Blood Pressure

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Everyone has blood pressure, but there are certain levels of blood pressure that experts consider healthy. Currently, 1 in 3 adults in the U.S. experience high blood pressure, including 1.7 million Kentuckians. When blood pressure is too high, you can have health problems like heart disease, heart attacks, and stroke.

## What is blood pressure?

Blood vessels are like small tubes with blood constantly flowing through them. For blood to flow to all parts of the body from the heart, there has to be enough force behind the blood for it to reach all the way down to our toes and all the way up to our brain. Blood pressure is the amount of force that blood causes as it pushes through the blood vessels in the body. The pumping of the heart creates this pressure.

Two different numbers are used to give you a blood pressure reading. The first number measures systolic blood pressure. This is the amount of pressure on your blood vessels when the heart muscle contracts.



The second number is diastolic blood pressure and tells you how much pressure is on your blood vessel between heart muscle contractions. The goal for blood pressure readings is below 120 over 80. This means the systolic blood pressure would be less than 120 and the diastolic blood pressure would be less than 80.

# What is high blood pressure (hypertension)?

High blood pressure, also called hypertension, is when the force pushing blood through blood vessels is too high. High blood pressure is diagnosed using categories. Elevated blood pressure is when your blood pressure is higher than normal, but not high enough to be diagnosed with high blood pressure. See Table 1 for more information.

Blood Pressure Category	Systolic (first number)		Diastolic (second number)
Normal	Less than 120	and	Less than 80
Elevated	120-129	and	Less than 80
Stage I Hypertension	130-139	or	80-89
Stage II Hypertension	140 or higher	or	90 or higher
Hypertensive Crisis (seek immediate care)	Higher than 180	and/or	Higher than 120

## How is hypertension harmful to the body?

High blood pressure causes the heart to work harder than it should. Over time, this damages the heart and blood vessels. Although health problems associated with high blood pressure are not common in children and youths, uncontrolled blood pressure can begin to harm the body early in life. In adults, high blood pressure can lead to heart disease, heart attacks, stroke, kidney problems, and vision problems.

It’s important to understand your risk of high blood pressure so you can make the best choices to protect your health. While certain risk factors including race, ethnicity, gender, age, and family history are outside of your control, many factors are related to lifestyle which you can control.

If your health-care provider tells you that you have high blood pressure, they are likely to recommend lifestyle changes. These may include getting regular physical activity and making small changes to your diet. You can get started by learning more about how

food can impact your blood pressure and how you can make healthy choices to prevent or manage high blood pressure.

## Sodium and high blood pressure

For most people, too much sodium in the diet pulls water into your bloodstream and increases blood pressure by increasing the volume of your blood. In the typical diet of people living in the United States, you most often find sodium as salt in packaged foods, processed meats, and restaurant foods. With high blood pressure, you should choose these foods less often. Some examples of foods high in sodium include:

- Canned foods
- Processed meats like deli meat, bacon, and sausage
- Frozen meals and pizza
- Fast food and restaurant food
- Packaged snacks like chips, pretzels, crackers, snack mixes, and popcorn

# Nutrition Facts

8 servings per container

**Serving size** 2/3 cup (55g)

**Amount per serving**

**Calories** 230

**% Daily Value\***

**Total Fat** 8g 10%

Saturated Fat 1g 5%

Trans Fat 0g

**Cholesterol** 0mg 0%

**Sodium** 160mg 7%

**Total Carbohydrate** 37g 13%

Dietary Fiber 4g 14%

Total Sugars 12g

Includes 10g Added Sugars 20%

**Protein** 3g

Vitamin D 2mcg 10%

Calcium 260mg 20%

Iron 8mg 45%

Potassium 235mg 6%

\* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

## Reading a nutrition label

Finding sodium on a Nutrition Facts label is a simple way to manage the amount of sodium you take in each day. The recommended Daily Value (DV) for sodium is 2,300 mg or less per day, but with elevated blood pressure or high blood pressure, your doctor may recommend you try to stick to a lower amount.

You can find sodium about halfway down on the Nutrition Facts label. It is listed with the amount in milligrams (mg) as well as the % DV. Foods with less than 5% DV are considered low-sodium and foods with more than 20% DV are considered high-sodium. The example provided has 2% DV of sodium, which makes this a smart choice for someone trying to lower sodium in their diet.

It's also important to watch out for serving size. Many packaged foods only show the nutrition information for one serving, yet there are multiple servings in the package. If you choose to eat more than what is considered a serving, you will be taking in more sodium than what is listed on the nutrition label.

## What is the dietary approach to stop hypertension (DASH) diet?

The DASH diet encourages heart-healthy foods like whole fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, whole grains, and healthy fats, while avoiding foods high in sodium and added sugar. Research shows the DASH diet is as effective at lowering blood pressure as common high blood pressure medications if you follow it over a longer period.

Ask your health-care provider to refer you to a registered dietitian (RD or RDN) if you have high blood pressure and are interested in learning more about how the DASH diet can fit into your lifestyle. If you are taking high blood pressure medication and following a DASH diet, do not stop taking your medication until you talk to your provider.

It's important to incorporate whole foods like fruits, vegetables, lean protein, beans, and whole grains into your diet. Look for low-sodium or no-salt-added versions of canned foods. Try low-sodium or salt-free versions of your favorite packaged snacks. Other tips for reducing the amount of sodium you are eating include skipping the added salt at the table, rinsing canned vegetables to remove excess salt, and seasoning food with herbs, spices, and salt-free seasoning mix when cooking at home.



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Small changes to your diet can have a big impact on your risk of high blood pressure. Look for ways to follow the tips below to best protect your heart and blood vessels.

1. Watch your sodium.
2. Choose lean protein.
3. Focus on fruits and vegetables.
4. Enjoy a variety of whole grains.

High blood pressure is common across Kentucky, but it doesn't have to be something you live with. It may seem overwhelming making lifestyle changes to reduce high blood pressure. Luckily, small changes, like simple swaps in the canned good aisle, over time can make a big difference in your blood pressure and reduce your overall risk for serious heart conditions.

## Resources

- <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/high-blood-pressure>
- <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/high-blood-pressure/understanding-blood-pressure-readings/monitoring-your-blood-pressure-at-home>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/brfss>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/bloodpressure>
- <https://www.fda.gov/food/nutrition-education-resources-materials/sodium-nutrition-facts-label>
- <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/dash-eating-plan>

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