Healthy Eating: Lowering Your Blood Pressure with DASH

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About one-fourth of men and one-fifth of women between the ages of 35 and 44 have high blood pressure (CDC, 2016). A recent report (Cifu, 2017) places even more adults into the category of “elevated” blood pressure. Uncontrolled high blood pressure can cause heart disease, kidney disease, stroke, and blindness. Being physically active, taking medications as directed, and eating a healthy diet all help to control blood pressure (AHA, 2016). One eating plan that has been shown to prevent and reduce high blood pressure is DASH. Read on to learn how the DASH eating plan can help you lower your blood pressure.

What is the DASH eating plan and why is it important?
DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension. The DASH eating plan is rich in fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products, making it high in calcium, magnesium, and potassium. These three minerals can help lower blood pressure. DASH is low in saturated fat and cholesterol, and moderate in total fat. The eating plan is more effective when you also reduce your sodium intake (NHLBI, 2015).

Several studies have shown that the DASH diet lowers blood pressure in people with high blood pressure. It also helps maintain normal blood pressure. Eating the DASH way can help you lose weight if you are overweight. Losing excess body weight can help lower your blood pressure (NHLBI, 2015).

How much and what types of foods should I eat?
The DASH eating plan includes lots of fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, and whole grains. You also eat poultry, lean meats, fish, legumes, eggs, and nuts (NHLBI, 2015).

Food group recommendations in the DASH eating plan also are available for 1,200-, 1,400-, 1,600-, 1,800-, 2,000-,
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Most older adults need fewer calories than younger adults. If you need more than 2,000 calories each day, you can add more servings.

### What is a serving?

Here are some examples of one serving from each of the food groups. These can help in meal planning, but how much you eat at a meal or snack will depend on your calorie needs and your level of hunger.

#### Grains

1 slice of bread

1 oz ready-to-eat cereal (½ cup to 1½ cup—check Nutrition Facts label)

½ cup cooked rice, pasta, or cereal

#### Vegetables

1 cup raw, leafy vegetables

½ cup cooked or cut-up raw vegetables

½ cup vegetable juice (choose lower sodium)

#### Fruits

1 medium fresh fruit

½ cup fresh, frozen, or canned fruit

½ cup 100% fruit juice

¼ cup dried fruit

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**Table 1. DASH food pattern for a 2,000-calorie meal plan.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Group</th>
<th>Servings per Day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grains (most of your servings should be whole grain)</td>
<td>6–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>4–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruits</td>
<td>4–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-fat or fat-free dairy</td>
<td>2–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lean meats, poultry, and fish</td>
<td>6 or fewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuts, seeds, or legumes</td>
<td>4–5 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fats and oils</td>
<td>2–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>2,300 mg*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweets</td>
<td>5 or fewer per week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2015.

*Limiting intake to 1,500 mg of sodium per day decreases blood pressure even further.

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Figure 2. The DASH diet is rich in whole grains and limits refined grain foods that do not provide dietary fiber.

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Figure 3. Brightly colored vegetables provide a variety of nutrients and phytochemicals needed for good health. They are naturally low in fat and sodium.

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Figure 4. Bananas are one of many sources of potassium, a mineral that contributes to blood pressure control.

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Low-Fat Dairy*
1 cup milk or yogurt
1½ oz natural cheese
*Use fat-free for fewer calories and fat

Lean Meats, Poultry, and Fish
1 oz cooked meat, poultry, or fish*
1 egg
*Less than 3 g fat per oz

Nuts, Seeds, and Legumes
½ cup or 1½ oz nuts
2 tbsp peanut butter
2 tbsp or ½ oz seeds
½ cup cooked dry beans or peas
¼ cup (about 2 oz) of tofu
2 tbsp hummus

Fats and Oils
1 tsp soft margarine or vegetable oil
1 tbsp mayonnaise (low-fat)
2 tbsp light salad dressing
2 tbsp avocado

Sweets
1 tbsp sugar, jelly, or jam
1 cup lemonade

Sources: NHLBI (2015); USDA (2017)

If switching to the DASH diet sounds overwhelming, don’t despair! Gradually add in the recommended foods such as fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy, and lean meats. Remember, doing something is better than doing nothing!

For more information about high blood pressure, see EDIS document FY684, Healthy Living: High Blood Pressure, at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy684.

For information on how to make better dietary choices using the food label, see EDIS document FY1127, Healthy Eating: Understanding the Nutrition Facts Label, at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy1127.

References


Figure 5. Lean fish is a great source of protein and other critical nutrients.
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