



A Quick Guide to Nutrition and Blood Pressure

According to the American Heart Association, high blood pressure, or hypertension, affects one of every three American adults over the age of 20. It's linked to heart attacks, strokes, kidney disease, and many other chronic conditions. Dietary choices can contribute to developing high blood pressure. What should you be doing to reduce your risks?

Limiting Sodium Intake

Salt is the main source of sodium in the American diet. High intake of sodium is connected with hypertension, particularly in the approximately 20 percent of the population who are considered "salt-sensitive."

More than 75% of the sodium in an average American diet comes from processed foods that have salt added to them to help preserve or flavor the food. Think of "instant" food mixes, frozen pizza, canned soups and broths, and salty snacks like chips or pretzels. Foods served at restaurants are also generally very high in sodium. A typical burrito from a restaurant can contain a day's worth of sodium (not including any sides).

What About Potassium?

When it comes to nutrition, people often focus too much on what to avoid without thinking about what they should be replacing it with. In regards to blood pressure, it appears that increasing potassium intake can have a protective effect against hypertension.

Of course, most Americans are far below the recommended daily intake of potassium. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans lists potassium as a nutrient of concern for this reason.

Which foods are high in potassium? Primarily fresh fruits and vegetables. Whole potatoes (with skin), bananas, spinach, beans, squash, watermelon, artichokes and tomatoes are all especially high in potassium. Dairy products and soybeans are also good sources.

A great example of the effect processing has on sodium and potassium is tomatoes. Whole, fresh tomatoes have around 350 milligrams of potassium and 7 milligrams of sodium per cup. One cup of a typical pasta sauce? That comes in at over 1,000 milligrams of sodium per cup, which is almost half the recommended upper limit of daily sodium intake.

In summation, if you have blood pressure concerns, focus on taking in less sodium (fewer processed foods and meals out) while increasing potassium in your diet (more whole foods, fruits, and vegetables).