

# Healthy Living: Changing Your Lifestyle to Improve Your Blood Pressure<sup>1</sup>

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Most people know that high blood pressure often can be improved by making smart dietary choices and choosing foods lower in sodium. But did you know there are other ways to help control high blood pressure and even prevent it? Read on to learn how making four lifestyle changes can help you keep blood pressure down.

## Lose Weight If You Are Overweight

If you are overweight, you have a higher risk for certain chronic diseases and conditions such as high blood pressure (World Health Organization, 2013). The good news is that losing weight helps decrease blood pressure. To lose weight, you have to eat fewer calories than you burn. Healthy ways to cut back calories and stay satisfied include the following:

- Watch your portion sizes.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables.
- Eat foods high in fiber, such as whole grains.
- Eat slowly and stop eating when you're full.
- Eat smaller meals more often.
- Include lean protein at each meal.
- Start meals with low calorie, filling foods such as soups and salads.
- Reduce the calories that you drink. Choose water, diet soda, tea and lemonade without sugar, or water with a splash of juice.



Figure 1. Credits: iStock

One way to know if you are overweight is to calculate your body mass index (BMI). This is a measure of body fatness that takes your height and weight into account. BMI is appropriate for most healthy American men and women (National, Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2013). You can visit <http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/> to calculate your BMI. If you do not have access to the Internet, ask your local Family and Consumer Sciences UF/IFAS Extension agent to calculate it for you. The following table lists the BMI categories and can be used to determine if you are overweight:

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Table 1.

BMI	
< 18.5	Underweight
18.5–24.9	Normal weight
25–29.9	Overweight
≥ 30	Obesity

Source: National, Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2013.

## Increase Physical Activity

In addition to making smart food choices, it's very important to be more active. Although being active can help you lose weight, physical activity can lower pressure even if you don't lose weight! The *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* suggest that adults participate in at least 150 minutes (two and a half hours) of moderate physical activity or 75 minutes (one hour and 15 minutes) of vigorous activity each week. For moderate physical activity, this is about 35 minutes a day (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). You don't have to do all this activity at once! Dividing it into three 10–15 minute intervals is just as effective. So if 35 minutes a day is too much to start, try a 10–15 minute walk after breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Start slow and increase your speed and distance as you are able. Moderate intensity physical activity includes the following:

- Mowing the lawn
- Dancing
- Golf (no cart!)
- Bicycling
- Brisk walking
- Weight lifting
- Swimming

Be sure to speak with your doctor before increasing your physical activity if you have high blood pressure!



Figure 2. Credits: Creatas

## Limit Alcohol Consumption

The third lifestyle change that can help control your blood pressure is to limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Men should limit their alcohol intake to two drinks or less per day, and women (and lighter-weight men) should limit to one drink or less per day. One alcoholic drink is defined as 12 ounces of regular beer, 4 ounces of wine, or 1½ ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits (American Heart Association, 2011a).



Figure 3. Credits: iStock

## Stop Smoking

Smoking is a strong risk factor for high blood pressure, according to the American Heart Association (2011b). If you smoke, quitting decreases your risk for high blood pressure, as well as heart disease, and lung and other cancers. Talk to your doctor about help to stop smoking. Most communities offer programs to support you while you quit and there may be some medications that help as well. Another benefit to kicking this unhealthy habit is that you save a lot of money. Did you know if you quit smoking one pack of cigarettes a day you would save about \$90 in one month and more than \$1,000 in a year (American Heart Association, 2011b)?! This would give you extra cash to enjoy more active hobbies such as dancing or gardening.

## Where Can I Get More Information?

The Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) agent at your county's UF/IFAS Extension office may have more information and/or classes for you to attend. Also, a registered dietitian (RD) can provide reliable information.

For more information about high blood pressure, see *Healthy Living: High Blood Pressure* (FCS8599) at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy684>.

For information on how to make better dietary choices using the food label, see *Healthy Eating: Understanding the Nutrition Facts Label* (FCS8883) at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy1127>.

Reliable nutrition information can also be found on the following websites:

- <http://choosemyplate.gov>
- <http://fyics.ifas.ufl.edu>
- <http://www.nutrition.gov>
- <http://www.americanheart.org>

## References

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