

The DASH Diet and Your Heart Health

If you have high blood pressure or are concerned you might get it in the future, then your health care provider may have told you about the DASH diet.

What is the DASH diet?

DASH stands for **D**ietary **A**pproaches to **S**top **H**ypertension.

It's been the standard for patients who wish to lower their blood pressure with nutrition for years now.

Part of the appeal of the DASH diet is its simplicity and flexibility. It's based on foods that are easy to find at any grocery store.



The key tenets are:

- Whole grains
- Fruits and vegetables
- Nuts and seeds
- Low-fat dairy products
- Lean meats like fish or poultry

Fats, oils, sugars, and salt are added sparingly.

DASH offers two levels of salt intake: A standard diet that recommends less than 2,300 mg a day and a low-sodium version that recommends less than 1,500 mg a day. Not surprisingly, the low-sodium version is even more effective at lowering blood pressure than the standard DASH diet.

DASH to lower blood pressure

The diet's reputation for lowering blood pressure is backed by solid scientific research. For example, a large study by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute says the DASH diet lowers blood pressure better than a standard American diet and a standard American diet that has more fruits and vegetables, even when all three diets had the same amount of salt (3,000 mg a day). Other research has shown that when salt intake is reduced while on the DASH diet, the benefits to blood pressure are even greater.

Some studies have shown that the diet can lower blood pressure in as few as two weeks. "The DASH diet is known to produce an average reduction of systolic blood pressure of 11 mmHg," says Maria Delgado-Lelievre, M.D., founder and director of the University of Miami Health System's Comprehensive Hypertension Center.

Does the DASH diet have other benefits?

Research through the years has shown that the benefits of the diet go far beyond blood pressure. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics says that the diet can reduce many cardiovascular risk factors, including heart disease and stroke.

This notion was reinforced by a 2021 study in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology. Researchers examined 412 patients over four weeks to determine if the DASH diet affected the blood biomarkers that lead to cardiac injury, strain, and

inflammation. The study results were significant: Patients on the DASH diet had 18% fewer biomarkers for cardiac damage and 13% fewer biomarkers for inflammation than the study participants on a standard diet. And those who followed a low-sodium DASH diet showed even more significant benefits with a 20% drop in cardiac injury biomarkers and a 23% drop in cardiac stress biomarkers.

"Keep in mind that an unhealthy diet is one of the most important causes of inflammation," Dr. Delgado-Lelievre says. "Thus, when you remove unhealthy foods, inflammation will decrease in our bodies. Inflammation is in many ways the starting point for heart disease."

Getting Started with DASH

It's a good idea to follow the American Heart Association's dietary recommendations regarding what to eat and avoid, says Dr. Delgado-Lelievre. This can help reduce existing risk factors for your heart, and prevent future illness.

"Eating is part of our culture and lifestyle. And our dietary patterns highly depend on our culture, upbringing, and resources," she says.

"Nevertheless, every patient can adapt their eating to an overall healthy dietary pattern that emphasizes a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, skinless poultry and fish, nuts and legumes, and non-tropical vegetable oils."

Wyatt Myers is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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