

High Blood Pressure Self-Help Guide

SECTION 1: HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE AND HYPERTENSION

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section One

Have you been told, or suspect, that you have high blood pressure?
This resource is a great step towards managing it.



High blood pressure isn't always obvious as it is rare to see obvious symptoms until the condition is quite advanced. This is why it is known as the silent killer and why it is important to know the score when it comes to your blood pressure.

As someone who has served in the Armed Forces you probably already have a good idea of what the lifestyle changes you may need to consider are, but like most people it can be hard to get the motivation and commitment to make the first step and then to persevere.

The good news is that by putting in place some of those lifestyle changes, following the advice from your GP (including taking any prescribed medication every day), managing and reducing high blood pressure is doable, can be kept under control and heart risks minimised.

High blood pressure: what is it?

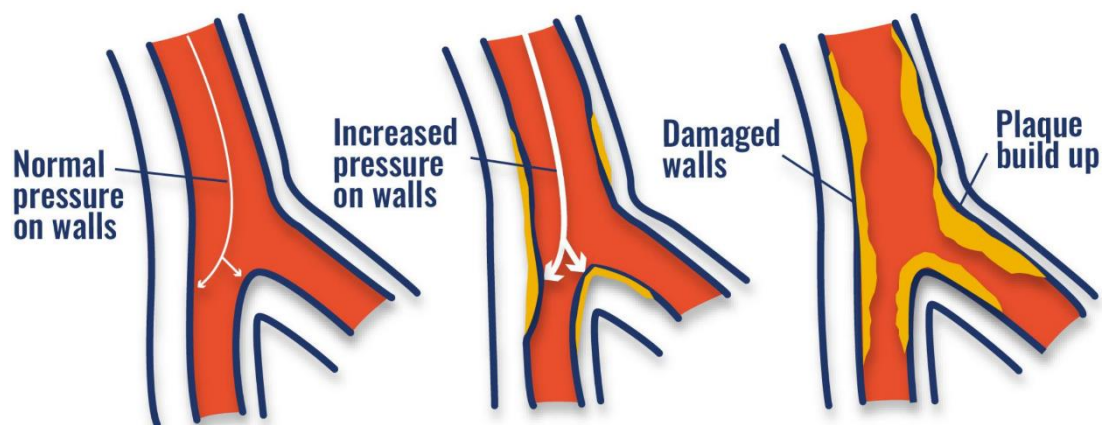
Blood pressure is the pressure of the blood being pushed by your heart travelling through your arteries. The blood is pushed through the arteries by contracting and relaxing.

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Your blood pressure changes through the day depending on what you are doing and your arteries are stretchy to cope with that.

If you have high blood pressure, your artery walls lose that stretchiness and become stiffer and weaker.

The narrowing makes it easier for fatty material to clog them up and your heart must work harder to get blood around your body. High blood pressure raises your risk of a stroke, heart attack, or heart failure.



Understanding blood pressure readings

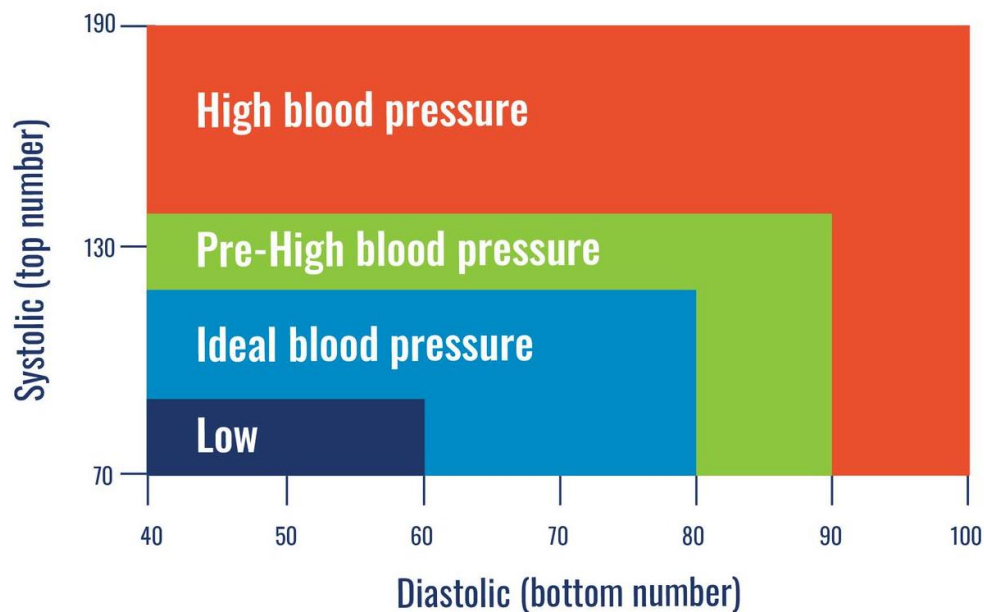
A blood pressure reading consists of two numbers usually shown as one on top of the other e.g. 123/78 and measured in mmHg (millimetres of mercury).

The first number represents the highest level that your blood pressure reaches when your heart contracts and pumps blood through your arteries. This is known as your systolic pressure. The second number represents the lowest level your blood pressure reaches as your heart relaxes between beats. This is known as the diastolic pressure.

If your blood pressure is consistently too high it means that your heart is constantly having to work harder to pump blood around your body.

We know from the World Health Organisation that in 2015 only 1 in 4 people with high blood pressure had the problem under control. If you think you may be one of the 75% of people who don't have it under control, seek advice from your Doctor to get some support to do so. Although blood pressure varies naturally from person to person the NHS chart below is a good guide to work from.

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SECTION 2: WHY MIGHT A VETERAN STRUGGLE WITH HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

It will take ~5 minutes to work through Section Two

We know that high blood pressure is more common in those serving in the Armed forces and veterans than in the general population, therefore veterans need to understand what it means to them and know how to track and manage it. Stress of combat exposure may have a long-term effect on heart health, particularly if you have a personal experience of witnessing death during combat. That stress from exposure has been linked to high blood pressure.

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Are you experiencing the following cycle?

In addition to the actual stress, serving personnel often turn to unhealthy ways of coping with their experiences. Smoking and drinking are common coping mechanisms used in the Armed Forces, both can lead to raised blood pressure and an increased risk of heart disease.



When you were serving, your chain of command will have drummed into you a strong emphasis on looking after yourself; eating well, keeping hydrated, regular physicals - you would have had clear instruction to look after yourself and therefore your unit. You would have been at the peak of your physical fitness.

When people leave the Forces, they often leave behind a lot of the structure they have grown accustomed to. It can be easy to keep the habits you liked from your former lifestyle, drop the ones which were less appealing and lose the balance that kept you fit and healthy.

Whilst it's not always clear what causes high blood pressure, there are certain diet, lifestyle or medical conditions that can increase your risk. You could be at increased risk if:



- You are over the age of 65
- You undertook multiple combat tours
- You are overweight
- You smoke
- You eat too much salt and do not eat enough fruit and vegetables
- You don't exercise enough
- You drink too much alcohol
- You have long term sleep deprivation
- You have other health conditions such as: diabetes, kidney disease, hormone problems, heart conditions, sleep apnea.
- You are using some medications** – such as steroids, Venlafaxine, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (such as ibuprofen), the contraceptive pill and some stimulant drugs like cocaine
- You are stressed

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**** If you have any concerns about any medications you are taking, please speak with your pharmacist or GP, do not stop medications on your own!**

Perhaps you have been diagnosed with high blood pressure and maybe you've heard all the talk about what you should do. Maybe you know or suspect there are changes you could be making but haven't felt ready to make them. It is really important that you think about why you would want to make changes for yourself and maybe those around you.

If you feel that you may be at risk, and haven't yet been diagnosed with high blood pressure, it's always best to get checked out by your GP.

From uneven ground to firm ground

If you have been diagnosed with, or suspect you have, high blood pressure, give the following exercise a try to help understand how you feel about it:

Take a sheet of paper and on the left-hand side draw symbols/write words to express your feelings about having high blood pressure at the moment.

Next, on the right-hand side of the paper, draw symbols/words to capture your hopes for the future.

Then draw a bridge between the two areas. Along it, add symbols/words to give yourself direction on what steps you need to take to improve your health.



Ask yourself:

- What is going on for me at the moment?
- What do I have to be thankful for?
- How would improving my health benefit me or other people in my life?

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- What abilities do I have to make changes?
- What do I want to achieve?

SECTION 2: WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

It will take ~5 minutes to work through Section Two

The first things to remember is that you have more strength than perhaps you realise and that are not alone.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- Do what matters - The doing part
- What your body needs – Listen to your body

To begin, read the rest of this section 'Do what matters' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Four: What your body needs

Do What Matters

Give yourself a break!

Unless you have already been told by your GP that you have high blood pressure, the only way to know for sure is to either have a health professional measure your blood pressure or you can use a blood pressure monitor at home (but remember to always inform your GP of the results).

If you do take your own blood pressure at home, make sure you keep a diary of your readings regularly so you can see your progress. Unless you have already been prescribed medication to lower your blood pressure, your GP may want to prescribe some.

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Be kind to yourself

When we focus too much on the challenging aspects or the seeming enormity of a situation we can feel a bit overwhelmed and unable to make changes, this can lead to stress, low mood or we might feel as if we can't achieve what we want.

The first thing to remember is that you have more strength than perhaps you realise and are not alone. Millions of people in this country live with high blood pressure every day and get support from the people they have in their lives and their GP.



Be kind to yourself and make small changes that may benefit your short and long-term health.

The Armed Forces were once in charge of what you ate, what exercise you needed, and developed your physical fitness for the career you had. Have a look at your lifestyle to see what, if any, changes you feel you want to make for your life now and in the future.

The veteran advantage

Like those who are currently serving, you as a veteran have been highly trained in discipline, focus, endurance and commitment to completing tasks.

Compared to most civilians, this gives you a head start in not only taking control of your health but achieving other goals you set yourself.



Take your prescribed medication

Check when you will need to get more and set a diary reminder a week before they are due, so you don't find yourself with a gap before getting your next batch.

Please make sure you are storing your medicine(s) safely, particularly if you have children or pets around.

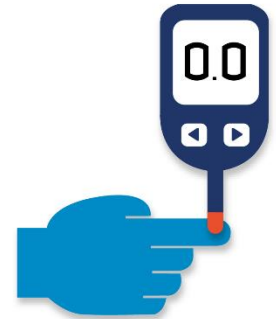


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Track and understand your blood pressure

Knowing and understanding your blood pressure is a big chunk of the battle. With this knowledge you can keep an eye on your own readings and discuss these with your GP to identify how well a prescribed medication may be working for you.

Although you can have your blood pressure reading taken at your GP surgery, if you find visiting your GP surgery stressful, you could look at doing it yourself.



Tracking your own blood pressure can be achieved easily by using a home blood pressure monitor available from most chemists and an app on your watch. The advantage of taking your blood pressure readings at home is that you will get a more natural reading.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

You may find it useful to use a Skills Diary to track the different methods, how they make you feel and whether you found it helped:

<https://selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk/downloads/high-blood-pressure.pdf>

SECTION 4: LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Four

The first things to remember is that you have more strength than perhaps you realise and that you are not alone.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- The doing part (Do what matters)
- Listen to your body (What your body needs)

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To begin, read the rest of this section 'What your body needs' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Five.

Regular Physical Exercise

Unless your GP has said you must not do exercise then it is important that you gradually start to get yourself moving. Start slowly and build up. If you have any concerns speak to your GP before you begin.

Set yourself goals but be realistic as to what you can achieve.

Some examples could be:

- A 10-minute walk round the block, or your garden every day for a week
- Make extra trips up and down the stairs, if you have them
- The British Heart Foundation's 10-minute workout can be done without even venturing outdoors. BHF 10 mins workout



Try to keep moving. Set yourself reminders on your phone, or on post-it notes, make moving around more part of your everyday life and find things that are enjoyable.

If you can get out of the armchair, make a point of getting up every hour through the day. You can stand and walk (or jog) on the spot whilst watching TV.

If you can't stand so easily check out YouTube, which has a number of exercise videos that can be done from a chair.

If exercise is already a part of your life, you can walk the dog that bit further, take a bike ride, run, cycle, whatever you enjoy.

Stop or reduce smoking

If you were thinking about giving up, or reducing, smoking this may be a good time to do it - your GP surgery can give you advice. If you can't stop smoking, then try to limit yourself.



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Reduce your salt intake

Fluid retention is caused by too much salt, which increases blood volume and blood pressure.

Adults should eat no more than 6g of salt a day (2.4g sodium) – that's around 1 teaspoon. Try to avoid adding extra salt to your cooking or cooked food, particularly as most foods contain salt already.



Stick to the recommended units of alcohol

Stick to the recommended limits. Men and women are advised to drink no more than 14 units a week, and those 14 units should be spread out over three or more days.

14 units is roughly the amount you would find in six pints of normal strength beer (4% alcohol by volume) or six medium (175ml) sized glasses of wine a week.



Eat Healthily

It is easy to seek out comfort food when we are feeling stressed or tired. Try to plan daily healthy choices, including the fruit and vegetables you enjoy, and remember to drink plenty of water. Your DS was right about that.

If you get a supermarket shop delivered to your home, then keep a list of your favourite healthy foods as part of your shopping regulars.

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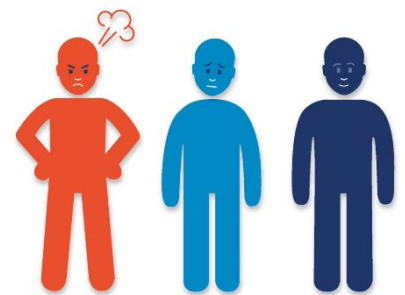
Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

SECTION 5: HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED FOR YOU?

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Five

Have you noticed any changes?

- Are you noticing any differences?
- Has anything shifted? For instance, have you noticed your high blood pressure becoming more manageable?
- What helped?



Celebrate your achievements

High blood pressure is manageable. Knowing your blood pressure, following medical advice and making the changes that you identify are right for you, will put you in charge and help improve your health and wellbeing. It is common for veterans to be self-critical, particularly if you feel you aren't making as much progress as you think you could or as quickly as you want.

Due to our need to survive we are mentally programmed to focus on risks and negatives, but when we focus on those things too much we can downplay what we have achieved. This is a long-term change and every step you take towards managing your blood pressure is an achievement to be proud of.

What to do next

Before moving on to your next resource, it's important you take time to reflect on what you've learnt here and take time to implement your new methods. Give yourself time to adjust to your 'new normal' before moving on.

Some questions you might have

What to do if I need further advice on high blood pressure as a veteran?

It might take some time to start reaping the rewards of your efforts. As with any new skill, keep at it and you will find it easier to use these skills when you need them. While

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these resources aim to give you some tools to manage your difficulties in-the-moment, for many of you this will only be the beginning. With this in mind, Combat Stress also provides specialist treatment programmes to help you tackle the past and take on the future. If you would like to know more, you will find the details of our 24-hour helpline below.

You can also contact your local GP Practice and discuss your questions or concerns either with a practice nurse or your GP.

How do I know what resource to do next?

You may remember when you first began these self-help guides, you filled out a questionnaire. This questionnaire enables us to guide you to the resources that will be most helpful to you. You'll find links to other guides in this series at <https://selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk/>.

Is there someone I can contact if I need more help or information?

If you're a veteran and need to talk to someone, or you're a family member/carer worried about the mental health of a loved one who has served, please call our Helpline.

The Combat Stress 24-hour Helpline provides free confidential advice and support to veterans and their families. Don't struggle in silence.

Call 0800 138 1619

You can also call your GP or the British Heart Foundation Nurses who provide online support via live chat, email or telephone. The Helpline is open weekdays 9am - 5pm, Saturdays 10am - 4pm Tel. 0300 330 3311 The live chat service is available on weekdays 9am - 5pm.

Are there any other resources that may help me?

- Blood pressure UK - www.bloodpressureuk.org
- British Heart Foundation - www.bhf.org.uk

Urgent help

If you require more urgent help, either yourself or a member of your family feel unsafe, please contact your GP or telephone 111.

This information was publishing on 30 October 2020.

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