

## The Best Exercise for Hypertension: A Little Goes a Long Way

**Research shows even small amounts of exercise can help lower high blood pressure. Here's how to start a slow but steady plan for safe, heart-healthy exercise.**

High blood pressure doesn't hit you over the head. It doesn't give you chest pain or make you huff and puff while climbing a flight of stairs. So it's easy to forget that high blood pressure puts you at risk for a number of health problems including heart attack, heart failure, stroke, and kidney failure, says Tracy Stevens, MD, of the Muriel I. Kauffman Women's Heart Center at Saint Luke's Mid America Heart and Vascular Institute in Kansas City, Mo. Dr. Stevens is also a professor of medicine at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and a spokeswoman for the American Heart Association.

If you're **obese** (defined as weighing 20 percent or more above your ideal weight) the threat to your health is even greater. One in three Americans is obese, and more than 110,000 deaths in the United States each year can be linked to obesity. But here's the good news: Even small amounts of modest exercise can help lower high blood pressure.

### Get Moving to Help Your Heart

Researchers at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, La., studied about 400 women between 45 and 75. All were overweight or obese, sedentary, and had high blood pressure. Researchers divided the women into four groups, three of which exercised at different intensity levels and for different lengths of time. The fourth group remained sedentary.

Six months later, all three groups of active women had improved blood pressure readings, the researchers found. The numbers for the group that did the most intense exercise were only slightly better than those of the group that worked out least intensely. Though the women did not lose weight, they benefited greatly from better improving their cardiovascular fitness.

Regular exercise also helps reduce stress, says Bridget Berran, MA, a clinical exercise physiologist at Burke Rehabilitation Hospital and the Smart Fitness Center in White Plains, N.Y. When you're under a lot of stress, your blood pressure can rise — another reason to begin an exercise program.

### Hypertension Exercise: Start Small, Think Big

Ideally, Stevens says, everyone — especially those with health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure — should get at least 2 and a half hours of modest exercise every week. "Try for at least 30 minutes a day most days of the week," she says, "and never go more than two days without any exercise."

One of the best and easiest exercises you can do is walk. You can walk anywhere, and it doesn't require any equipment beyond a good pair of sneakers. "I love for people to get outdoors and walk, but some are fearful of uneven ground," Stevens says. If you're walking hilly terrain and are afraid of falling, grab a walking stick. "It gives you that little bit of stability so that you can walk with confidence," she says.

If walking around the block seems daunting, the thought of starting an exercise routine can be overwhelming. But don't worry, says Stevens. Start small and walk for only five minutes, three times a day.

The key is to get started with a hypertension exercise program. After a few minutes a day, you'll find it gets easier each time — and easier to add more time to each workout. Before you know it, those five minutes will become 10, and doing 10 minutes three times a day will add up to the 30 you need.

