



The DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) is an option for people looking to prevent or treat high blood pressure and reduce their risk of heart disease. It was created after researchers discovered that high blood pressure was much less common in people who followed a plant-based diet, such as vegans and vegetarians. Scientists believe that one of the main reasons people with high blood pressure can benefit from this diet is because it reduces salt intake.

How Does The DASH Diet Work?

The DASH diet emphasizes the consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean meats. It is low in red meat, salt, added sugars, and fat.

The regular DASH diet program recommends no more than 1 teaspoon (2,300 mg) of sodium per day, which is in line with most national guidelines.

The lower-salt version recommends no more than 3/4 teaspoon (1,500 mg) of sodium per day.

What to Eat on the DASH Diet

The DASH diet prioritizes serving sizes of different food groups over a regimented list of specific foods to eat. The number of servings you can eat depends on how many calories you consume. Here is an example of food portions based on an average 2,000-calorie diet.

Whole Grains: 6–8 Servings per day

Examples of whole grains include whole-wheat or whole-grain breads, whole-grain breakfast cereals, brown rice, bulgur, quinoa and oatmeal.

Examples of a serving include:

- 1 slice of whole-grain bread
- 1 ounce (28 grams) of dry, whole-grain cereal
- 1/2 cup (95 grams) of cooked rice, pasta or cereal

Vegetables: 4–5 Servings per day

All vegetables are allowed on the DASH diet.

Examples of a serving include:

- 1 cup (about 30 grams) of raw, leafy green vegetables like spinach or kale
- 1/2 cup (about 45 grams) of sliced vegetables — raw or cooked — like broccoli, carrots, squash or tomatoes

Fruits: 4–5 Servings per Day

If you're following the DASH approach, you'll be eating a lot of fruit. Examples of fruits you can eat include apples, pears, peaches, berries and tropical fruits like pineapple and mango.

Examples of a serving include:

- 1 medium apple
- 1/4 cup (50 grams) of dried apricots
- 1/2 cup (30 grams) of fresh, frozen or canned peaches

Dairy Products: 2–3 Servings per day

Dairy products on the DASH diet should be low in fat. Examples include skim milk and low-fat cheese and yogurt.

Examples of a serving include:

- 1 cup (240 ml) of low-fat milk
- 1 cup (285 grams) of low-fat yogurt
- 1.5 ounces (45 grams) of low-fat cheese

Lean Chicken, Meat and Fish: 6 or Fewer Servings per day

Choose lean cuts of meat and try to eat a serving of red meat only occasionally — no more than once or twice a week.

Examples of a serving include:

- 1 ounce (28 grams) of cooked meat, chicken or fish
- 1 egg

Nuts, Seeds and Legumes: 4–5 Servings per week

These include almonds, peanuts, hazelnuts, walnuts, sunflower seeds, flaxseeds, kidney beans, lentils and split peas.

Examples of a serving include:

- 1/3 cup (50 grams) of nuts
- 2 tablespoons (40 grams) of nut butter
- 2 tablespoons (16 grams) of seeds
- 1/2 cup (40 grams) of cooked legumes

Fats and Oils: 2–3 Servings per day

The DASH diet recommends vegetable oils over other oils. These include margarines and oils like canola, corn, olive or safflower. It also recommends low-fat mayonnaise and light salad dressing.

Examples of a serving include:

- 1 teaspoon (4.5 grams) of soft margarine
- 1 teaspoon (5 ml) of vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon (15 grams) of mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons (30 ml) of salad dressing

Candy and Added Sugars: 5 or Fewer Servings per Week

Added sugars are kept to a minimum on the DASH diet, so limit your intake of candy, soda and table sugar. The DASH diet also restricts unrefined sugars and alternative sugar sources, like agave nectar.

Examples of a serving include:

- 1 tablespoon (12.5 grams) of sugar
- 1 tablespoon (20 grams) of jelly or jam
- 1 cup (240 ml) of lemonade

Tips On Transitioning To A DASH Diet Approach

Because there are no specific foods required on the DASH diet, you can adapt your current diet to the DASH guidelines by doing the following:

- Eat more vegetables and fruits.
- Swap refined grains for whole grains.
- Choose fat-free or low-fat dairy products.
- Choose lean protein sources like fish, poultry and beans.
- Cook with vegetable oils.
- Limit your intake of foods high in added sugars, like soda and candy.
- Limit your intake of foods high in saturated fats like fatty meats, full-fat dairy and oils like coconut and palm oil.

Outside of measured fresh fruit juice portions, this diet recommends you stick to low-calorie drinks like water, tea and coffee.

Potential Health Benefits

Beyond reducing blood pressure, the DASH diet offers a number of potential benefits, including weight loss and reduced cancer risk. However, the diet was designed fundamentally to lower blood pressure, so weight loss may simply be an added bonus.

Lowers Blood Pressure

High blood pressure is considered to have a reading of 140/90 or higher. Studies have proven that the DASH diet lowers blood pressure in both healthy people and those with high blood pressure.

People following the DASH diet still experienced lower blood pressure even if they didn't lose weight or restrict salt intake.

However, when sodium intake was restricted, the DASH diet lowered blood pressure even further. In fact, the greatest reductions in blood pressure were seen in people with the lowest salt consumption.

These low-salt DASH diet results were most impressive in people who already had high blood pressure, reducing systolic blood pressure by an average of 12 mmHg and diastolic blood pressure by 5 mmHg.

In people with normal blood pressure, it reduced systolic blood pressure by 4 mmHg and diastolic by 2 mmHg.

This is in line with other studies which reveal that restricting salt intake can reduce blood pressure — especially in those who have high blood pressure. Keep in mind that a decrease in blood pressure does not always translate to a decreased risk of heart disease.

Supports Weight Loss Efforts

The more you weigh, the higher your blood pressure is likely to be. While you are likely to experience lower blood pressure on the DASH diet regardless of weight loss, if you already have high blood pressure, chances are you have been advised to lose weight. Losing weight in and of itself has also been shown to lower blood pressure.

Some studies suggest that people can lose weight on the DASH diet. However, those who have lost weight on the DASH diet have been in a controlled calorie deficit — meaning they were told to eat fewer calories than they were expending.

Given that the DASH diet cuts out a lot of high-fat, sugary foods, people may find that they automatically reduce their calorie intake and lose weight. Other people may have to consciously restrict their intake.

Either way, if you want to lose weight on the DASH diet, you'll still need to reduce daily calorie intake.

Decreases Cancer Risk

A recent review indicated that people following the DASH diet had a lower risk of some cancers, including colorectal and breast cancer.

Lowers metabolic syndrome risk

Some studies note that the DASH diet reduces your risk of metabolic syndrome by up to 81%.

Lowers diabetes risk

The diet has been linked to a lower risk of type 2 diabetes. Some studies demonstrate that it can improve insulin resistance as well.

Decreases heart disease risk

In one recent review in women, following a DASH-like diet was associated with a 20% lower risk of heart disease and a 29% lower risk of stroke.

Many of these protective effects are attributed to the diet's high fruit and vegetable content.