



Spring 2026

## Smoking, Vaping and Nicotine: Effects on Your Brain and Body

When people think about smoking risks, they often think about lung disease. But tobacco and nicotine use through any mechanism affect nearly every organ, including the brain and heart.

### Risks of smoking

Smoking damages blood vessels, raises heart rate and blood pressure, and promotes plaque buildup in arteries. Over time, reduced circulation limits oxygen to the brain and other organs.

Chronic exposure to tobacco smoke also drives inflammation and oxidative stress, which contribute to long-term cognitive decline.

These changes increase the risk of:

- Stroke, caused by blocked or ruptured blood vessels in the brain
- Dementia, including Alzheimer's disease
- Peripheral artery disease and heart disease

### Risks of vaping

E-cigarettes are often marketed as safer than cigarettes, but they still expose users to nicotine and other harmful substances.

Aerosols found in vape products may contain heavy metals, ultrafine particles and chemicals that irritate lung tissue and blood vessels. These exposures can impair circulation and may increase the risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke.

Many vaping products deliver high levels of nicotine, which can quickly lead to dependence and affect attention, memory and mood.

### Risks of nicotine

Nicotine itself is highly addictive and changes brain chemistry by triggering dopamine release in the brain's reward system. Repeated exposure makes it harder to function without nicotine and can worsen anxiety and depression symptoms.

Nicotine also:

- Raises blood pressure and heart rate
- Constricts blood vessels
- Increases cardiovascular risk
- Interferes with brain development in teens and young adults

Products such as nicotine pouches may seem safer because they do not produce smoke, but they still deliver concentrated nicotine and can sustain addiction.

### The benefits of quitting

Quitting nicotine allows the body to begin healing. Heart rate and blood pressure can improve within hours, circulation can improve within weeks, and stroke and heart disease risk can decline over time. Long-term cognitive risk also improves.

Most people succeed with a combination of medication and behavioral support, and it often takes more than one attempt.

**Ready to quit?** Henry Ford Health's Tobacco Treatment Service provides expert support.

Learn more at [henryford.com/services/tobacco-treatment](https://henryford.com/services/tobacco-treatment) and always consult with your provider to develop a safe treatment plan.

# How to Keep Blood Pressure in a Healthy Range



High blood pressure increases the risk of heart disease and stroke, but your numbers are not fixed. Even if hypertension runs in your family, lifestyle changes can make a meaningful difference.

Your daily habits play a powerful role in managing blood pressure. Research shows that following heart-healthy eating patterns, staying active, and making mindful lifestyle choices can lower your risk and support long-term heart health.

## Six eating habits that support healthy blood pressure

### 1. Fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables

Produce provides antioxidants, anti-inflammatory compounds and potassium, all of which support healthy blood pressure. Beets, berries, spinach, tomatoes and bananas are strong choices.

### 2. Choose whole grains

Oatmeal, quinoa and brown rice are rich in fiber, vitamins and minerals. They also contain plant compounds that help lower cholesterol and stabilize blood sugar. Look for “100% whole grain” on labels.

### 3. Limit saturated and trans fats

Butter, full-fat dairy, palm oils and processed foods often contain unhealthy fats. Aim for less than three grams of saturated fat per serving and avoid trans fats altogether.

### 4. Include heart-healthy fats

Replace saturated fats with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Omega-3-rich foods such as salmon, tuna, chia seeds, flax and walnuts can reduce blood pressure and improve blood vessel health.

### 5. Select lean protein

Skinless chicken, turkey, fish and lean beef cuts labeled “loin” or “round” provide protein without excess fat. Fish is especially heart healthy because it contains omega-3 fatty acids.

### 6. Watch your sodium

Too much sodium raises blood pressure. Most adults should stay under 2,300 milligrams per day, and people with hypertension should aim for less than 1,500 milligrams. Read labels carefully since packaged foods often contain hidden salt.

## Beyond diet, tips for lower blood pressure

- **Regular Exercise:** Regular aerobic exercise can help improve circulation and lower blood pressure.
- **Reduce stress:** Relaxation techniques, deep breathing and mindfulness can help.
- **Limit alcohol:** No more than two drinks a day for men and one for women.
- **Check for sleep apnea:** If you snore or often feel tired after sleeping, talk to your doctor about testing.

### Take charge of your numbers.

Learn more at [henryford.com/blog/categories/feelwell](https://henryford.com/blog/categories/feelwell) and always consult with your provider for individual nutrition advice.

## Quick Tips for Healthy Blood Pressure

### Eat smart

- Fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables
- Choose whole grains like oatmeal, quinoa and brown rice
- Add potassium-rich foods (bananas, spinach, beans)
- Keep sodium under 2,300 mg/day (1,500 mg if you have hypertension)
- Avoid trans fats and limit saturated fats

### Live healthy

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Stay active with regular exercise
- Limit alcohol (2 drinks/day for men, 1 for women)
- Manage stress
- Get checked for sleep apnea if needed

Partner with your provider to keep your blood pressure in check.

# How Can I Get in Shape?

Maybe you exercised regularly at one time but stopped because of a schedule change, added stress or a simple loss of motivation. Or maybe you are starting a consistent routine for the first time. Either way, it helps to know what to expect.

With steady effort, most people begin to build muscle strength and cardiovascular endurance within four to six weeks. Visible changes often follow by about 12 weeks.

Consistency matters. Aim for about four workouts a week, spacing them out to allow recovery. Rest days should still include light movement — sometimes called active recovery — such as yoga, swimming, cycling or foam rolling. These lower-intensity sessions keep your body moving without pushing for additional gains.



## Start at a pace that fits

If you are new to structured exercise, consider working with a certified personal trainer or strength and conditioning coach. Professional guidance can help you develop proper form, reduce injury risk and tailor a program to your goals and fitness level.

Choose a pace that feels challenging while allowing you to complete each movement with good technique. If weights feel so heavy that you cannot finish repetitions with control, scale back. After one to two weeks, once the routine feels manageable, gradually increase intensity.

Running requires a slightly different approach. A walk-run method — alternating one minute of walking with 30 seconds of running — allows your body to adapt safely. Over time, extend the running intervals to build endurance.

Starting slowly can prevent injury and burnout. Doing too much too soon often leads to soreness, frustration or quitting altogether.

## Breaking through plateaus

After several weeks of consistent training, progress may stall. This is common and often signals that your body has adapted to your routine.

To move forward, vary your workouts. If you routinely perform squats or bench presses, try different exercises that target the same muscle groups in new ways. Runners can increase distance, adjust pace or incorporate interval training.

Depending on your goals, continued gains may not always be necessary. Maintenance is a worthwhile objective. Preserving strength, mobility and endurance can support long-term health and function.

## How quickly do you lose fitness?

Fitness declines more quickly than it builds. Muscle strength and cardiovascular endurance can begin to decrease after about two weeks of inactivity. That does not mean a single missed workout will undo progress. However, extended periods of complete inactivity can lead to noticeable losses.

If travel or life events disrupt your routine, stay as active as possible. Even one or two lighter sessions can help maintain conditioning and ease the transition back to your usual schedule.

Most important, allow for flexibility. Not every workout will feel strong or productive. Progress is gradual, and setbacks are normal. Building and maintaining fitness is a long-term commitment that rewards steady effort over time.

Learn more at [henryford.com/blog/categories/movewell](https://henryford.com/blog/categories/movewell) and talk with your Level 1 primary care doctor before beginning a new exercise routine.



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## Resources to Remember

**Henry Ford GM ConnectedCare Concierge Team**  
**844.436.7637**

Available Monday-Friday 7:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. to help you find a provider or schedule an appointment.

**Health Advocate, provided by GM**  
**844.411.4600**  
**HealthAdvocate.com/GM**

**LifeSteps Wellness Program, provided by GM**  
**888.383.8755**  
**LifeSteps.com**

GM offers the LifeSteps program to support employees in improving and maintaining their overall health and well-being. Learn more on My GM Total Rewards.

### **HenryFord.com/MyChart**

The Henry Ford MyChart online tool gives you access to your medical records, test results, a way to communicate with your provider and schedule/conduct virtual visits. Sign up with your 8-digit medical record number (MRN). If you don't know your MRN, call the Concierge team at (844) 436-7637.

Learn more at [www.henryford.com/gm](http://www.henryford.com/gm).

