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Chapter 1

The Lowdown on DASH

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, affects one in three of the world's adult citizens, including nearly half of all U.S. adults. It contributes to millions of deaths from heart disease, stroke, and kidney failure every year. But it doesn't have to be this way. For most people with hypertension, medication is very effective at bringing blood pressure down and reducing these risks. And the good news is that in many cases hypertension can be prevented or improved by adopting a diet and lifestyle that supports health and well-being. That's what this book is about.

The Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet was created to offer a safe, science-backed way to lower blood pressure while also boosting wellness and vitality. Unlike many eating plans, DASH makes it easy to enjoy the foods that you already know and love while helping you achieve your goals and live your life to the fullest. In other words, it makes food a delicious part of the treatment plan.

This chapter shines a spotlight on what makes DASH so powerful for heart health — and good health in general. We uncover what makes it different from all the other diets out there, and we explain how easy adjustments to your daily routine can help you to find real and lasting success.

Understanding the DASH Difference

Years ago, if you were diagnosed with hypertension, your doctor may have simply sent you on your way with a prescription and advice to cut back on salt. But over the past two decades, research has revealed much more about the powerful impact of diet, body weight, and lifestyle on blood pressure. Studies by physicians, scientists, dietitians, and others have concluded that controlling blood pressure is about far more than just salt. That's where DASH comes in. In the next few sections we trace the history of DASH and explain why DASH is more than just another trendy diet.

Exploring the origins of DASH

The acronym *DASH* comes from a landmark 1997 *clinical trial* (a well-controlled human research study) that tested the ways that certain foods can affect blood pressure. Instead of focusing only on what people with hypertension should avoid, the study looked at how a variety of easy to find, affordable whole foods may affect blood pressure.



REMEMBER

Study participants following the DASH diet experienced impressive results. When people ate more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lowfat dairy, while also cutting back on saturated fat, their blood pressure went down noticeably. In fact, the reduction was about the same as what you'd expect from taking a standard blood pressure medication. The drop in blood pressure was evident within two weeks, even though they were on the DASH diet plan for eight weeks.

A lower blood pressure isn't just about the number. DASH researchers estimated that the improvement in blood pressure meant a 15 percent drop in heart attack risk and as much as a 27 percent reduction in stroke risk.



TECHNICAL
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It's worth noting that study participants who followed the DASH diet minus the dairy also reduced their blood pressure, but the decrease was less. That's why including lowfat dairy is recommended for maximum effectiveness.

Having confirmed that healthy and delicious food could lower blood pressure just as effectively as a pharmaceutical drug, the DASH researchers turned their attention to salt. The study, known as DASH-Sodium, found that by cutting salt to about 1,500 milligrams (mg) daily, blood pressure improved even more than with DASH alone. In fact, even a little reduction in salt made an important difference in blood pressure — both in people with borderline high blood pressure and those with true hypertension.

For a deeper dive into the science behind the DASH study, see Chapter 2. Less interested in the science than in finding advice on how to create a healthy diet plan that works for you? We help you out in Chapter 4.

Recognizing why DASH isn't just another trendy diet

Every year a new diet book comes out, full of promises and complete with enthusiastic endorsements from influencers and celebrities. Is the DASH diet really any different? Absolutely, 100 percent. No doubt about it.

DASH is science-based, developed from reams of scientific research that identified certain foods as being especially beneficial for blood pressure. The DASH team put their highly educated heads together and came up with a diet that incorporated those foods into an easy-to-follow, inexpensive program that can make a meaningful difference. Not only can DASH bring down your blood pressure, but it can also help with weight loss (thanks to its fiber-rich whole grains, fruits, and vegetables), reduce diabetes risk by replacing starchy foods with complex carbohydrates, and more. Head to Part 2 for an in-depth look at all the benefits DASH provides for your health.

DASH: A Dietary Prescription for a Healthier Lifestyle

Unlike some medical prescriptions, DASH works for just about anyone. If you're vegetarian or have food restrictions like gluten or lactose intolerance, DASH is flexible enough to fit your needs. DASH is about easy and satisfying food choices combined with practical lifestyle changes. In the next sections, we show you what that looks like day to day.

Exploring the basic dietary guidelines

Every type of food included in DASH has a purpose, as you can see from the following list:

- » **Whole grains give you plenty of fiber, potassium, magnesium, and antioxidants.** All of these help to support the health of your cardiovascular system and lower your blood pressure. Whole grain is different from white or



TIP

refined flour, which is less nutritious. That's because after the rough part of the grain is stripped away, most of the nutrients are gone as well.

If you need to steer clear of *gluten* (a protein abundant in wheat, barley, and rye products), you have a variety of interesting whole-grain options to choose from, including quinoa, millet, rice, and oats.

» **Fruits and vegetables offer blood pressure-friendly nutrients galore.**

These include a wide range of vitamins and antioxidants, plus potassium and fiber. Although whole grains also provide a similar list of healthy elements, the variety supplied by fruits and vegetables is very different. Your body is an incredibly complex system, so you can't rely on just one category of food to give you everything you need.

» **Lowfat dairy foods are strongly linked to a lower risk for hypertension because they're rich in vitamin D, calcium, magnesium, and potassium; high in protein; and low in saturated fat and calories.**

Evidence also suggests that consuming certain fermented full-fat dairy foods, including cheese and yogurt in moderation, may reduce the risk of stroke and heart disease, even if they don't impact blood pressure.



TIP

If you're lactose intolerant, check with your doctor and see whether a lactase supplement may help you enjoy these healthy foods. We provide more pointers on how dairy can fit into your DASH diet in Chapter 11.

» **Lean meats, fish, and poultry provide plenty of protein to build a healthy and strong body, while limiting your exposure to saturated fats and excess calories.**

Although DASH hasn't been specifically tested in vegetarians, it's easily adaptable. That's because animal protein is a relatively smaller part of the plan than it is in a typical Western diet. If you're a vegetarian, try substituting soy products or other high-protein, plant-based options. Chapter 21 has some recipes you can try.

» **Nuts, seeds, and legumes provide heart-friendly, plant-based protein, plus healthy fats, fiber, and magnesium.**

Technically speaking, peanuts and soy nuts aren't nuts, but instead they're members of the legume family. Although the calories can add up quickly, they come from healthy fats and are a much better choice than typical snack-food fare.

DASH is important not only for the foods it includes but also for those it limits:

» **Fats and oils are limited but not out of bounds in the DASH diet.** Since the time that DASH was developed in the 1990s, more recent research has confirmed the benefit of foods rich in omega-3 fats, such as oily fish, as well as monounsaturated fats like olive oil. A second set of studies known as *Omni-Heart* confirmed that switching out a small portion (about 10 percent)

of carb-based calories and replacing them with healthy monounsaturated fats can make DASH even more effective, as long as the calories remain the same.

» **Sugary and high-fat treats aren't forbidden on DASH, but they're kept to a minimum.** If you're like us, you probably enjoy a little treat now and then. Strict, overly restrictive diets aren't always realistic. The DASH plan builds in some flexibility, so you can still enjoy the foods you love. And as soon as you start to feel the benefits, those snack foods may not seem nearly as irresistible.

Table 1-1 shows the recommended amounts of different food groups when following DASH, along with some examples from each group. If what you see here looks a bit basic or maybe even overwhelming, don't despair. We share more than 40 great-tasting recipes in Part 4. (*Note:* The servings listed in Table 1-1 are based on a 2,000-calorie diet. Some people need more calories than that; others need fewer calories.) For a deeper look at DASH nutrition, see Chapter 5.

TABLE 1-1 **The DASH Diet**

Type of Food	Number of Servings for a 2,000-Calorie Diet	Example Serving Sizes
Grains and grain products	6-8 per day	1 slice bread, 1 cup dry cereal, ½ cup cooked cereal, rice, or pasta
Fruits	4-5 per day	10 grapes, ½ grapefruit, 1 small banana, 2 tablespoons raisins, 1 medium apple
Vegetables	4-5 per day	1 cup raw, ½ cup cooked
Lowfat or nonfat dairy products	2-3 per day	1 cup milk or yogurt, 1 ounce cheese
Lean meats, fish, poultry	2 or fewer per day	3-4 ounces cooked per day
Nuts, seeds, legumes	4-5 per week	½ cup nuts, 2 tablespoons nut butter, 2 tablespoons seeds
Fats and oils	3-4 per day	1 teaspoon margarine, butter, or oil; 2 tablespoons salad dressing
High-fat/high-sugar extras	5 or fewer per week	½ cup sorbet or frozen yogurt, 1 "fun-size" candy bar, 8 pieces of gummy-type candy, 1 tablespoon jam; 1 ounce dark chocolate (70 percent to 85 percent cocoa)



With DASH, you can achieve better blood pressure through delicious meals. And with such a wide variety of foods to choose from, you can tailor DASH to your own tastes and preferences.

Identifying the most powerful lifestyle changes

Just as you need a balanced blend of healthy foods to achieve good health and better blood pressure, your body also requires balance in other areas. Throughout this book, we help you cultivate healthy habits to support the vitality, energy, and overall well-being that you're craving. Although making changes to your daily routine may seem intimidating at first, it's surprisingly simple. You just have to take it one step at a time.

We tell you much more about the way lifestyle impacts your health in Chapter 16. For now, we start with some basics. The sections that follow highlight simple but powerful changes that you can make today. These small steps can add up quickly, helping to lower your risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, and many other conditions.

Moving more

Being active daily is essential for optimal health. You don't need a gym membership or fancy workout clothes. Getting more daily activity can be as simple as putting on your sneakers and walking out the door.

It's never too late to begin an exercise habit. By slowly building up to two and a half hours each week, you'll lower your blood pressure, reduce your stress level, burn some calories, and cut your risk of heart disease, stroke, and dementia. Even a consistent commitment to 15 minutes a day can make a difference.

There's no one-size-fits-all exercise prescription. If hitting the gym is your thing, go for it! If you're a weightlifter, just make sure you get a good balance of aerobic exercise along with the resistance training. Yoga and Pilates are also terrific ways to take care of your body and enhance mindfulness. Adding some walking, running, biking, swimming, or regular yardwork to your weekly routine helps keep your heart even stronger.



Exercise isn't only for the young or athletic. Even if you have physical limitations, chances are there's an activity that can work for you. The key is finding what feels safe and enjoyable for your body. Keep in mind that anytime you're beginning a new exercise regimen or bumping up the intensity, check in with your doctor

or physical therapist. That way you'll be sure your plan makes good health sense for you.



TIP

Because exercise can lower blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol, keep track of your numbers when you get started. If you have hypertension, high cholesterol, or diabetes, you may even find that over time you need less medication to keep these conditions under control.

Getting clear on caffeine, alcohol, and smoking

For many people, a cup or two of tea or coffee is a great way to take a break and recharge. You may be happy to know that naturally caffeinated beverages aren't off limits on DASH. These plant-based drinks actually offer a boost of healthy antioxidants along with the caffeine. The important thing is not to go overboard. Doctors used to shake their fingers at people with a coffee habit, but the research on coffee and tea now suggests that these drinks have health benefits when enjoyed in moderation. That's generally considered to be 3 cups (24 ounces) or fewer per day.

A word to the wise: Caffeinated sodas, including diet drinks and energy drinks might give you a quick burst of energy, but they don't come with the same health benefits. On top of that, they usually come with a hefty dose of sugar or other sweeteners that may work against your health.



REMEMBER

Although coffee can cause a temporary bump in blood pressure, it doesn't appear to cause hypertension. Of course, some people can't take a sip of tea or coffee without experiencing heart flutters or heartburn. If that's you, then it's best to abstain, or consider a switch to decaf.

Alcohol is a more complicated question. In the past, moderate alcohol was often encouraged. That's because when enjoyed in moderation, some research indicates that there may be health benefits for the heart and brain. Moderate means one drink per day for women and two for men. One drink means 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces (one shot) of liquor. More than that and you're more likely to develop high blood pressure, especially if you binge drink. Heart failure and heart rhythm problems like atrial fibrillation are also more common in heavier drinkers.

More recent research suggests that even if there may be heart benefits with a drink or two a day, the risk for cancer from even moderate alcohol use may outweigh any benefits. That's why some doctors advise avoiding any amount of alcohol. Additional downsides of overindulging in alcohol include alcoholism, poor decisions made under the influence, gastrointestinal problems, and of course weight gain from the extra calories.



WARNING

We can't talk about health without mentioning smoking. Of course, it's no secret that smoking is one of the most damaging habits for your body. Not only does smoking raise your risk for a variety of nasty forms of cancer, but it also drastically raises your chances of heart attack, stroke, aneurysms, and blocked leg arteries. Smoking may not impact your blood pressure very much, but it can hurt you in just about every other way. Quitting isn't easy, but it's well worth the effort. Your primary care practitioner can help you find a way to kick the habit.

Reducing stress

Not all stress is created equal. There's good stress, which you have control over, and then there's the bad kind, which leaves you feeling overwhelmed and powerless. Guess which form of stress is harmful? Of course, it's the kind that makes you feel out of control. At times you can sidestep the more damaging stress, but when it's tied to your job or family, it may be hard to avoid.



TIP

Stress can seem like so much a part of everyday life that it begins to feel normal, but the truth is that uncontrolled stress can affect your health. You may not even notice it, but stress can make you crave a quick fix like a snack or soda. Snacking isn't always a bad idea. It can give you a needed boost when your energy is flagging. But processed snack foods spark a vicious cycle of craving and hunger, so you're never satisfied for long. Keep more nutritious options in easy reach, and you may find it easier to handle stress when it shows up.

Stress can raise your blood pressure. Of course, you can't always walk away from every stressful situation, and sometimes you may not want to. But often there's at least one part you can change for the better. Taking small steps to care for yourself can make a real difference for your health. Stress can also take a toll on your sleep. Poor sleep not only raises the risk of high blood pressure but can also trigger cravings for less healthy foods.



TIP

When stress goes beyond the everyday hassles, it can help to talk with a qualified mental health professional. With the right support, you'll find it easier to regain balance. And when life feels steadier, healthy choices often start to feel more natural.

Preparing for Success with DASH

By choosing DASH, you're making an important investment in your health and vitality. Unlike many other diet plans, DASH doesn't tell you exactly what to do; there are no gimmicks, supplements, or special products involved. Instead, DASH offers a variety of options that you can use to make it your own. We think you'll

find that flexibility is exactly what makes DASH so useful and realistic. We're here to help it make sense and to keep it easy and fun.

Choosing foods that support your health

Does the word *diet* make you think of bland, boring meals; feeling deprived with nothing to look forward to; lonely evenings avoiding social situations where food may appear? We're here to show you how DASH is different. DASH was created to be enjoyable, sustainable, and full of flavor.

One of the really wonderful things about DASH is that it gives you such broad scope to make your own choices about the foods that you eat. Studies of DASH have integrated the plan into menus all over the world, including the United States, Asia, Europe, South America, and the Middle East.

Some things about DASH may surprise you. For example, for many people, the number of servings of fruits and vegetables is an eye-opener. If you follow DASH, you'll naturally start to cruise the produce aisles with more curiosity. You can think of it as a great adventure!



REMEMBER

The DASH diet is lower in sodium than a typical Western diet. Give your taste buds a few weeks to adjust. If you cut back slowly, you'll notice it less, and it won't feel like you're giving something up. Before long, you'll likely discover that you enjoy the natural flavors of foods more than ever. We tell you more about salt in Chapter 2.



TIP

Limiting sweets and other simple carbs like food made with white flour can feel challenging at first, especially if convenience foods have been part of your daily routine. Snacks aren't completely off limits, but DASH keeps processed foods to a minimum. Just like with salt, your taste buds will gradually adjust to the change, and your cravings will diminish over time. Even better, you may notice more energy and a better mood when you choose a small portion of a treat that genuinely satisfies.

Chapter 11 tells you more about how to adopt a DASH way of life, including a customizable 7-day meal plan to make it work for you. For help setting up your kitchen for your new cooking adventures, see Chapter 13. Or for advice on following DASH when dining out or traveling, see Chapter 15.

PUTTING FOOD BEFORE SUPPLEMENTS

You might imagine skipping healthy eating and simply getting your nutrition from a pill or powder. Plenty of products claim to do just that. But supplements rarely live up to the hype. One reason is that the supplement industry is largely unregulated, leaving manufacturers with little accountability for their claims.

Over the years, trends have come and gone for a wide variety of supplements marketed for wellness. When put to the scientific test, some have had unintended consequences, including a greater risk for certain cancers, diabetes, liver disease, and heart disease. Some supplements used for weight loss and energy may put you at risk for heart rhythm disturbances, heart attacks, and strokes. And although a multivitamin won't hurt you, little evidence shows that it will do you much good, either.

Wholefoods in their natural form are very different from supplements. There are literally dozens of nutrients packed into a single bite. Your body was designed to use foods this way. When you instead overwhelm your system with very high doses of a single substance or nutrient, you run the risk of unintended consequences.

Of course, there are exceptions. For instance, many people are deficient in vitamin D, and in these cases, a supplement can be helpful. The same may apply to iron and certain B-vitamins. Your doctor can test you to see whether your levels are low. Other supplements, like fiber, can help with constipation and even lower cholesterol. And sometimes a protein shake can be a reasonable replacement for a single meal. But before you take a product's marketing on faith, or put your trust in the latest influencer, check in with your doctor or a registered dietitian.

Creating lifestyle changes that stick

Even though hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke can happen to anyone, you can influence all these conditions with lifestyle choices. The good news is that small, positive changes in the way you eat and how you spend your time can create a lasting impact on your health and quality of life. Even when challenges are part of daily life, small steps toward healthier choices can make a meaningful difference.



TIP

Don't think of DASH as "going on a diet." That implies a temporary situation. Instead, think about making lifestyle changes that you can live with. The key to making it stick is to avoid feeling deprived or drained. You'll find practical recipes in Part 4 and step-by-step guidance, including plenty of real-world strategies in Chapters 4, 11, and 16.

By following the DASH diet, you'll have a plan that will support your health and vitality. With that extra energy, exercise may feel less overwhelming, and you may find that you have the power to shift other habits might be holding you back.



REMEMBER

Track your successes and forgive your slip-ups. Reach out for support from your healthcare professionals or a friend when you need encouragement or are seeking focus. Making healthy changes may seem difficult at first, but by taking it one step at a time, you may be surprised at how far you are able to go.

A DASH of Caution

Although DASH is a fabulous plan that promotes better health and well-being for most people, it's not for everyone.

One advantage of DASH is the fact that it's high in potassium. For most people, that helps their kidneys regulate blood pressure more efficiently. But people with advanced kidney disease may need to limit the potassium in their diet.



WARNING

If you have a chronic medical condition or take prescription potassium, discuss any major changes in the foods you choose with your doctor. In some cases, you may need more careful monitoring of blood work. Some people find that a more plant-forward diet like DASH allows them to cut back on the potassium pills. Your healthcare professional can give you guidance.

Of course, if you have high blood pressure, DASH may lower it enough that your medications can be adjusted. That's a really good side effect, but not one that you want to overlook. When you commit to DASH, monitor your blood pressure closely, especially in the first couple of months. Weight loss can also lower your blood pressure. Keep your doctor informed of any changes. Doctors usually love it when patients can ditch a pill or two.



WARNING

If you have a disease or disorder that requires medical nutrition therapy (MNT), consult with a registered dietitian/nutritionist (RDN) for individual nutrition counseling before starting the DASH diet. Talk to your doctor about a referral or find an RDN near you by checking out "Find a Registered Dietitian" at www.eatright.org.

Finally, a brief word about salt. Despite the fact that most people around the world eat far more salt than their bodies need, certain individuals need more, and not everyone needs to cut back. Competitive athletes and people working outdoors in the heat are typical examples of people who might need extra salt. A small

minority of people suffer from low blood pressure, and in those cases, extra salt is often the treatment of choice. We tell you more about salt in Chapter 2.

The great thing about DASH is that you can easily adapt it for a wide variety of tastes and conditions. Because everybody is different, check with your healthcare team before jumping in with both feet, and let them be a partner in your path to wellness.