

# The Fitness Assistant

Tips & tools to help you succeed

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## understanding exercise and its effects on blood pressure

When considering your “medical team” of health professionals, especially as you age, remember, YOU are the most important person on this team. While there are those times you should consult with one of your physicians, we must become a proactive health advocate for our own well being, and understand what we can do to minimize emergency visits to our doctor. Too many of us are guilty of living day to day until we get sick, then we go to the doctor only to receive prescribed medications to manage our “sickness”.

Become more proactive today, and realize the little, yet significant steps we can take to stave off the many “lifestyle related diseases.” *If knowledge is power, knowing your body is empowerment.* Understanding blood pressure is an important step in getting to know your body. High blood pressure is inevitably problematic for a small percentage of people with a family history of it, yet it effects too many people who end up with high blood pressure due to their daily nutrition and activity habits.

The risk of high blood pressure (hypertension) increases with age. We cannot stop aging, but we can fight the side effects of getting older. Don't sit back and wait for high blood pressure to strike, get moving! Regular exercise can help prevent high blood pressure,

which reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke. And if your blood pressure is already high, exercise can help you control it.

### Blood Pressure Defined

The simplest analogy is comparing each artery and vein in your body to a water hose. Imagine turning on the water hose and watching the water flow through the hose easily, (like healthy arteries) and out of the opening. Now place your thumb at the end of the hose. The water pressure builds up in the hose. If you were to measure the pressure pressing against the walls of the hose, this would be the same as your blood pressure reading. Each time our heart pumps, it pushes blood through our arteries, and if the pressure on the arterial walls is too high, especially in one area, for example when a blockage of plaque (fat deposit) build-up is acting like your thumb on the hose, problems occur.

### How Exercise Helps

Regular physical activity makes your heart stronger. A stronger heart can pump more blood with less effort. The less your heart has to work, the less force, or pressure, that's exerted on your arteries.

Becoming more active can lower your blood pressure by an average of 10 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg).

That's the same effect as some blood pressure medications. For some people, it's enough to reduce the need for blood pressure medication.

If your blood pressure is at a desirable level — less than 120 / 80 mm Hg — exercise can keep it from rising as you age. And there's more. Regular exercise also helps you maintain a healthy weight, another important way to control blood pressure.

It takes about one to three months for regular exercise to have a stabilizing effect on blood pressure. The benefits last only as long as you continue to exercise.

### What “Exercise” is Best?

Flexibility and strengthening exercises are important, but it takes “aerobic” activity to control high blood pressure. This activity can be as simple as walking 20-30 minutes a day 4+ times per week. Remember that something is better than nothing, so a short 10 minute bout is beneficial as well.

Any physical activity that increases your heart and breathing rates is considered aerobic. Mowing the lawn, raking leaves or scrubbing the floor counts, as long as it takes effort. Other common forms of aerobic activity include climbing stairs, walking, jogging, bicycling and swimming.

*(Some of the above information is from the MayoClinic.com)*

Check our next *Fitness Assistant*, finding your “target heart rate zone” found in the fitness center. Please contact one of the Webster Groves Personal Trainers today if you'd like to discuss your wellness goals or current fitness plan. This article and others can be found online at [www.wgpersonaltraining.org](http://www.wgpersonaltraining.org).

### TABLE 1. Exercise may help manage blood pressure by:

- strengthening your heart so it can pump more blood with less effort
- helping “flush out” arteries, thereby decreasing chances for blockage
- helping manage your weight, which is often correlated to high BP
- helping control blood sugar levels, that may lead to high BP
- saving money on BP medications that can be used on a gym membership