

# Bossy Numbers

By Suze Hargraves

Numbers are bossy by their very nature. They measure, clock, report and otherwise tell us what we should, shouldn't, would, wouldn't, can or can't do. Blood pressure is one of those bossy numbers. High blood pressure (HBP) is a serious condition that can lead to coronary heart disease, heart failure, stroke, kidney failure, and other health problems. Sometimes it seems like your blood pressure reading can be downright cranky. It just doesn't seem to want to cooperate. It goes up when we think it should be going down or it stays the same when we think we're doing "the right things". How are we supposed to control this cranky number? There are ways my friends. Let's start off with a basic understanding of what your blood pressure numbers mean. The first part of the number is "systolic" which the pressure is during a heartbeat. The second half of the number is "diastolic". That's the pressure between the heartbeats. The number you get from having your blood pressure taken is given as systolic over diastolic. (i.e. 120/80). In general for an adult 120/80 to 110/75 is the figure you're shooting for. Anything numbers over (or under) those ranges are causes for concern and needs to be addressed.

Your healthcare provider may prescribe medication, but they will also request that you make some lifestyle changes. It's that whole pesky "personal responsibility" thing again. According to the National Heart Lung Blood Institute, the most important things a patient can do are to follow a healthy eating plan, maintain a healthy weight, exercise, quit smoking, and manage stress. Most folks, even those with the best intentions, seem to have one problem with making these changes; they're not sure where to start or when they do make changes in their lifestyle, their blood pressure doesn't change. It's frustrating. It's not, however a reason to give up. Here are some simple, practical tips you can use, in addition to your healthcare providers advice, to help you realize your good intentions and reach your blood pressure management goals:

- Focus on changing one thing at a time. Don't try to break all your bad habits at once.
- Learn which healthy behaviors help you de-stress, refocus and make you happy. There are all sorts of good things like after dinner walks, being productive around the house and yes; even sex is good for lowering stress. Surprised? Don't be. WebMD reports "A big health benefit of sex is lower blood pressure and overall stress reduction, according to researchers from Scotland who reported their findings in the journal *Biological Psychology*."
- Make better choices as you shop by picking foods lower in fat, sugar and sodium. Watch your calorie intake. If you have a food that you're having trouble giving up, try allowing yourself that food only once a week. Don't try to change your whole diet right away. Changes made over time stick.
- Add physical activity to your life wherever you can including walking instead of driving, parking further away from your destination, taking the stairs or even doing things like washing cars, tending gardens or raking those pesky pine needles. Whenever you can, get up and move.
- Often decisions we make in life tend to be based on what's best for someone else or what others expect. Remember to put your own happiness and health into the equation. A happier you will have a much better chance at being a healthier you.
- Sometimes people in our lives counter-act our best efforts by creating negative influences, generating anger or stress or simply encouraging bad habits. It's time to tell them that you're now on your list of important, imperative priorities. They need to respect that.

When it comes to high blood pressure, like any medical condition, management is a team effort, but your healthcare provider can only do so much. The rest is up to you. Remember, these changes are literally for life. You won't be able to make them in one day. Be patient with yourself.

Those numbers may be bossy, but you're the one who really has the control. Don't ever forget it.

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