

## 4 The DASH Diet

The DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet was designed to test the effect of a diet rich in plant-based foods on blood pressure. It's low in sodium and fat, and high in micronutrients such as potassium, calcium, magnesium and fibre. Emphasis is on eating plenty of fruit and vegetables (five servings a day), whole grains, fat-free or low-fat dairy products, fish, poultry, beans, nuts, seeds and vegetable oils, and foods low in sodium – only two-thirds to one teaspoon of salt is allowed daily. It also limits refined sugar intake.

### What the experts say...

“The main benefit of the DASH diet is blood pressure control. By reducing sodium in your diet, your kidneys hold on to less excess fluid in the body, lowering your blood pressure as a result,” says DR CLAUDIA CHEW of Complete Healthcare International. “Doctors usually recommend those who have pre-hypertension or a family history of hypertension to follow the DASH diet.”

Other health benefits are linked to the diet, too. “Since this plan is rich in fruit and vegetables, the high fibre content may help to protect against various types of cancer, ease constipation and contribute to intestinal health,” says Veronica. “Additionally, extra virgin olive oil, nuts, seeds and oily fish contain good fats that

have proven health benefits in reducing inflammation, lowering high blood pressure, and reducing the risk of heart disease and stroke.”

And, though the primary aim of the DASH diet is not weight loss, Dr Chew says some body weight will be shed because of an overall healthier dietary intake, especially when combined with regular physical activity.

### How doable is it?

“Although any diet can have its share of difficult-to-follow components, the DASH diet is generally easy to follow, as it doesn't restrict entire food groups. You won't need to buy special pricey foods and there are no hard-to-follow recipes,” says Dr Chew. However, she says alcohol intake is limited; one drink daily for women and two for men.

Dr Rajnakova agrees that this is a feasible diet. “You can eat almost everything in moderation, choosing among a variety of foods. You're supposed to reduce your salt intake but it's very easy when you have a variety of herbs and spices available to make your food tastier.”

Of course, as with any diet, moderation and patience is key, says Dr Chew. “Slow and gradual dietary changes usually encourage longer-term compliance and effectiveness. Getting support from your doctor and a dietician is also useful,” she says.

