Yoga and Ayurveda
for Reducing High Blood Pressure
by Meggan Brummer

What is High Blood Pressure?
Imagine the pressure of water pushing against the walls of a garden hose when the tap is on full. Well, this is very similar to the pressure on the walls of our arteries caused by the force of blood when our heart beats. If the pressure is allowed to get too high it can result in arterial disease, directly increasing the risk of coronary disease, heart attacks or strokes, as well as potential damage to brain functions and vital organs such as the kidneys and eyes. And apparently around ten million people in the UK have high blood pressure – that is one in five! All told, high blood pressure is not for the faint hearted.

How Do I Know if I Have It?
High blood pressure itself does not usually have initial symptoms, although the subsequent consequences can be very obvious! Many people remain undiagnosed and unaware of their condition. Indeed, many calm, relaxed people have hypertension, so no clues there. The only sure way to determine your blood pressure is to get it checked by your doctor. Regular checks are important, especially for people who have a family history of high blood pressure, and these checks can detect pressure increases before the consequences start to become apparent.

What Are the Symptoms?
From a Western approach, the symptoms of high blood pressure are described as being any or all of the following:
- Head and neck ache on waking up, usually subsides quickly;
- Dizziness/light headedness;
- Heart pain or palpitations;
- Frequent urination;
- Nervous tension;
- Tiredness;
- Breathing problems.

But you must ask the question...
Why is it that so much appears to be known about high blood pressure, its causes, symptoms, consequences and treatments, yet this 'the silent killer', is still one of the most common problems general practitioners are attempting to manage?
Perhaps, as with so many other conditions plaguing Western society, we could learn from Ayurveda, the world's oldest and most complete system of natural health care. Ayurveda states that the symptoms of high blood pressure differ according to each person’s dosha, or constitutional type, which is typically a combination of two of the following, with one being dominant – vata (air), pitta (fire), or kapha (earth). In general, high blood pressure is commonly viewed as a pitta or vata condition, or an imbalance of one of them.

Typical symptoms for Pitta type people: flushed face, red eyes, headaches, light sensitivity, irritability, nosebleeds, violent headaches, anger, irritability, burning sensations, blood
pressure fluctuates a lot, wiry and tight pulse.
**Typical symptoms for Kapha type people:** excess weight, water retention, high cholesterol, sluggishness, blood pressure remains continually high, obesity and tiredness.

**Typical symptoms for Vata type people:** may feel cold, overworked, have gas, bloating or constipation and insomnia. An increase in blood pressure will be followed by worry, strain, anxiety and nervousness. Blood pressure may rise and fall suddenly with nervous tension, irregular or erratic pulse, both in rhythm and strength.

Compare these comprehensive sets of symptom descriptions with the generalized and simplistic Western equivalent.

**The Ayurvedic Approach**

Regarding the causes, again Ayurveda takes a different approach from the West, providing a more comprehensive list of imbalances that contribute to high blood pressure:

- Toxins accumulating in our body tissues;
- Poor nutrition;
- Poor digestion;
- Imbalance of the nervous system;
- Accumulation of both physical and mental stress;
- Lowering of natural resistance and immunity;
- Disruption of natural biological rhythms;
- A hectic lifestyle;
- Dosha imbalances;
- Hardening of the arteries;
- Obesity.

**Ayurvedic Treatment of High Blood Pressure**

Because hypertension can be caused by so many diverse influences, Ayurveda does not simply identify the gross physical abnormality and match drugs to the symptoms. An Ayurvedic evaluation determines the imbalances in the body, views them as the root causes of a condition, then works to remove them. By determining the causal imbalances at the basis of a disorder, the fundamental source of ill health in the individual can be removed. Since hypertension can be influenced by many factors, the Ayurvedic approach to treatment is a comprehensive one that balances many physiological functions simultaneously.

The goal of an Ayurvedic approach is to enliven the body's natural healing and self-repair ability in a wholistic treatment that typically takes into consideration nutrition and diet, lifestyle, exercise, yoga, breathing exercises (*pranayama*) and meditation, along with various herbs and minerals and other tips.

**Treatment tips for Pitta Types:** Herbs used include aloe gel, barberry and katuka; in stronger cases, bitter herbs such as aloe, rhubarb root or senna. Gotu kola is also useful for calming the nerves and relieving heat and stress.

**Treatment tips for Vata types:** Garlic is very good for this condition as it is helpful in alleviating vata imbalance and controlling blood pressure by helping lower cholesterol and triglyceride. Eat an entire crushed clove (with honey) once or twice a week or mix 1gm of garlic into a paste with a glass of buttermilk and drink twice a day. Alternatively, eat two or three raw cloves of garlic on an empty stomach in the morning and drink nutmeg in warm milk.

**Treatment tips for Kapha types:** Avoid dairy, butter, eggs and high fat foods; incorporate plenty of hot spices in the diet, particularly mustard and onions. Include herbs such as: cayenne, myrrh, garlic, motherwort and hawthorn berries, and avoid licorice.

**Yoga**

Yoga is so much more than just an alternative form of exercise. Research shows that practicing yoga (including poses or *asanas*, breathing techniques and meditation) promotes an alpha brainwave state, known to lower blood pressure. It is also a truly great and natural way of releasing stress not only physically, but also mentally and emotionally. Stress and anxiety play a major role in raising and keeping high blood pressure high.

Yoga postures (*asanas*) help in regulating the blood pressure by stabilizing the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system and bring balance to the autonomous nervous system, a centre that controls stress. During normal exercise, the demands on muscles increases, as does the requirement for blood and oxygen. However, with yoga, these requirements decrease as every muscle is relaxed. It also enhances the functioning of the endocrine glands, digestive organs, heart and other organs.

The following poses have been put together in a simple sequence so that each flows on from and into the next. A few tips before you begin – keep your eyes closed throughout the practice (this will be easier after a few rounds, as you come to know it by heart), and practise the poses before you practise the breathing exercises, meditation and relaxation. Lastly, make sure you rest for a few breaths between each pose, and do not do any exercise to the point of exertion and exhaustion. Before you begin the sequence do a few gentle warm-ups, shaking and loosening the limbs in whatever way you prefer.

**Anjali Mudra (Salutation Seal)**

Sit comfortably in *Siddhasana*.

Inhale as you bring your palms together. Rest the thumbs lightly on your sternum, lifting the sternum into your thumbs. Press the hands firmly but evenly against each other and bow your head slightly.

(This palms-together gesture can also be held in front of your forehead or slightly above and in front of the crown of your head.)
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The Art of Living

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According to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the founder of The Art of Living Organization, approximately 70% of the toxins from the body are released through the breath, but most of us are using no more than 30% of our breathing capacity. The accumulation of toxins and impurities in the vascular system can

Matsya Kridasana (Flapping Fish Pose)

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eventually disrupt their functioning. This process plays out in a wide variety of chronic conditions, not least of which is high blood pressure. Ayurvedic *triphalo* powder every night with warm water is often recommended for strengthening the digestive system.

**Reduce your intake of toxins.** Toxins accumulate in our bodies when we eat foods which are hard to digest, drink liquids which require taxing metabolization, when our digestive and elimination systems are weak, and when we are stressed either physically, mentally, emotionally, or all three. Most chronic disorders start when toxins accumulate in the body tissues and obstruct the channels of circulation and elimination. Such blockages prevent proper nutrition and inhibit the processes that cleanse impurities.

**Avoid smoking.** While smoking itself does not increase blood pressure, it can add to the harm caused by high blood pressure. It is estimated to increase the risk of heart attack and stroke threefold in individuals with high blood pressure. Nicotine also increases the resting heart rate and increases the release of adrenaline. Once smoking is stopped, this extra risk is quickly reduced.

Ayurvedic massage. We can assist the removal of toxins from our bodies and aid the deeper cleansing processes with regular ayurvedic herbal oil massages, heat treatments and mild herbal enemas. These processes open the channels of circulation and elimination so that proper nourishment can reach the tissues, and impurities are more easily eliminated.

**Ayurveda herbs.** An Ayurvedic practitioner can select the appropriate herbal formulas to aid the healing process, strengthen digestion and help the body. Herbs are most effective after a person completes an internal cleansing programme.

In conclusion, once again we find ourselves discussing a high revenue generator for the pharmaceutical companies. Medications that ‘manage’ rather than ‘cure’ produce highly desirable lifetime clients for their products. I am certainly not suggesting you chuck out the pills. I am strongly recommending you invest the time and commitment to discover the contribution Yoga and Ayurveda can make to reducing and stabilizing high blood pressure reducing armoury. After all — you are worth it!

**References**

1. [http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/diseases/facts/hypertension.htm](http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/diseases/facts/hypertension.htm)

**About the Author**

Meggan Brummer is a freelance photojournalist and teacher of the Art of Living Course, created by the highly revered Spiritual Master, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. The courses include Yoga, Meditation and a powerful breathing technique called the *Suddarshan Kriya*, a simple yet highly effective method for eliminating physical and mental stress/toxins. Meggan may be contacted via Tel: +0061 423 027 580; meggan.brummer@gmail.com; www.megganbrummer.com
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