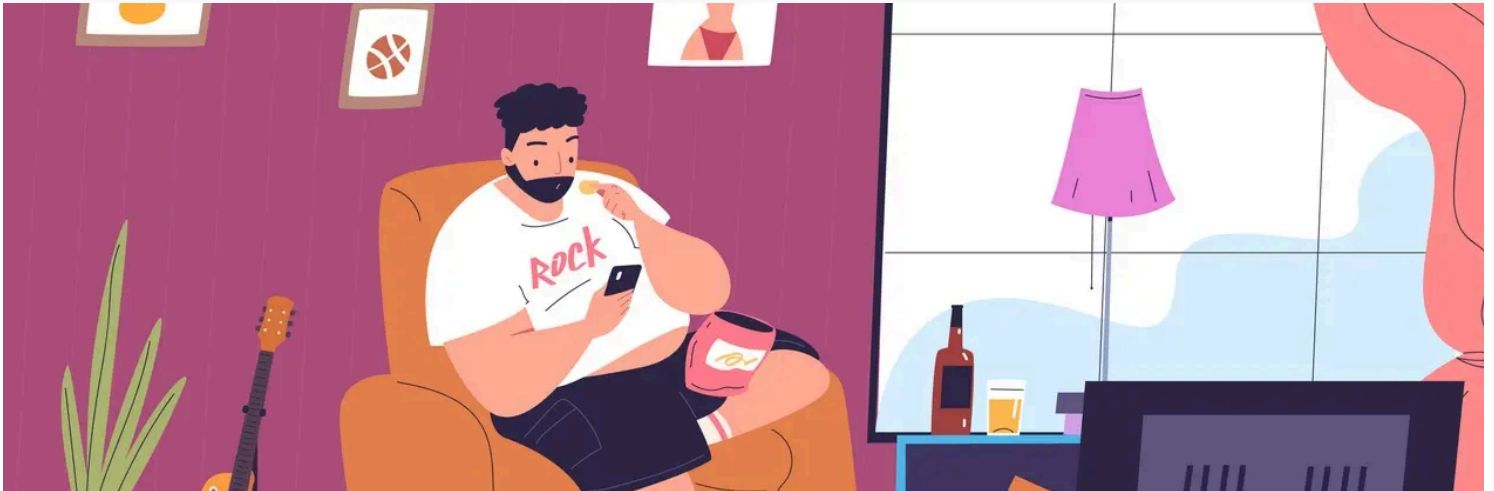




[Health topics](#) > [Heart health and blood vessels](#) > [High blood pressure](#) >
On the rise: what causes high blood pressure in young adults



On the rise: what causes high blood pressure in young adults

Peer reviewed by **Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCGP**

Authored by **Amberley Davis**

Originally published 24 Apr 2024



High blood pressure is affecting the under 50s more and more frequently – but why? We explore the lifestyle habits among Millennials that may be responsible for this rise. Whatever your age, by addressing these causes of high blood pressure, you can help keep your blood pressure healthy and try to avoid the serious health issues it can lead to.

In this article:

- > [What causes high blood pressure in young adults?](#)
- > [A diet high in processed foods](#)

- > Seated jobs and indoor hobbies
- > Ongoing stress
- > Smoking and vaping
- > Further reading

What causes high blood pressure in young adults?

Millennials are less healthy than Gen X members were at the same age, in countries like the UK and US^{1,2}. Aged between 28–43 years in 2024, Millennials are more likely to face conditions like high blood pressure, **high cholesterol**, and **type 2 diabetes** in their thirties, compared to the generation before them.

High blood pressure (hypertension) occurs when the heart has to pump harder for your blood to pass through narrower blood vessels. This leaves you more vulnerable to potentially life-threatening health problems, like heart attack or stroke. It also puts you more at risk of seriously damaging other parts of your body, like your kidneys, brain, and eyes.

Some people are greater chance of having high blood pressure due to factors outside of their control. Having parents with this health problem, being born with a low weight, and having Black African or Black Caribbean heritage are examples of this.

Yet, there are also things within your control. These are the lifestyle factors that are more commonplace among people under 50 than they ever have been before.

A diet high in processed foods

In countries like the UK and US, the average diet contains far more processed foods than it used to. From fast food to microwave meals, **ultra-processed foods (UPFs)** are generally high in ingredients that elevate blood pressure.

One study even found that people who eat a lot of UPFs are 23% more likely to develop high blood pressure³. UPFs are high in:

- **Salt** – too much dietary salt pulls water into your bloodstream, increasing pressure. The average adult consumes over two teaspoons (10.8 grams) a day – more than double what is recommended⁴.

- **Sugar** – high sugar levels cause atherosclerosis, where fatty material builds up in your blood vessels, narrowing them and increasing pressure.
- **Fat** – like sugar, a high saturated fat intake can lead to excess fat in the blood vessels.

If you eat lots of processed foods, you're also probably not getting enough whole grains. These foods – which include unprocessed oats, brown rice, and quinoa – help to lower blood pressure by supplying a mineral called potassium.

UPFs and obesity

A diet including UPFs is also typically high calorie **and addictive**. As a result, it's a key factor in the ever-increasing obesity rates in the UK and US^{5,6}.

Having high blood pressure is intimately linked with obesity. Excess weight gain raises blood pressure in several ways, affecting hormones, the nervous system, kidneys, and stomach (abdominal) organs⁷.

What about alcohol?

Alcohol can affect the muscles in your blood vessels. Those under 50 are generally drinking less than previous generations, but make no mistake, the amount of alcohol consumed by the average adult is still high.

The more you drink, the higher your chances of developing high blood pressure. This is especially true if you're over the age of 35. One drink a day can increase your risk. Remember, alcoholic drinks are typically high in calories, which also contributes to excess weight gain – another big factor for high blood pressure.

Seated jobs and indoor hobbies

High blood pressure is also linked with being inactive. So, how much you are moving is also very important.

Generally, younger and middle-aged adults are much less mobile in their daily activities than previous generations. Modern technology and industries are crucial in this. For example:

- Thanks to computers, a great number of us have sedentary desk jobs, meaning we spend most of our time seated.

- The cultural shift to working from home, spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic, also means less of us are walking much at all to reach work.
- Technology has also introduced video games, with Millennials the first generation to be introduced to this form of sedentary entertainment from childhood.
- Adults of all ages also use cars to get places more than ever before. This means less time walking and cycling – or even running for public transport.

Being physically active not only helps control your blood pressure by aiding healthy weight loss. It also strengthens your heart and reduces stress – all of which is good for blood pressure. Aim for at least 150 minutes (two and a half hours) of moderate intensity exercise a week⁸.

Moderate exercise includes brisk walking, swimming, gardening, light jogging and tennis playing.

Ongoing stress

There's much about modern life that can stress us out, from work **burnout** to social media anxiety⁹.

Ongoing stress, common in today's society, can increase blood pressure. When you're stressed for a long time, this sends your nervous system into over-drive. It's thought that this triggers inflammation and causes blood vessels to narrow, so blood can't flow as easily around your body¹⁰.

The relationship between stress and high blood pressure is complex. As difficult as it may seem, you need to address the route of the problem. This will vary for different people. Here are some examples.

Addressing burnout

Grounding techniques and mindfulness exercises can help get you through high-pressure days at work. Part of a healthy lifestyle is also about finding a good work-life balance that allows your mind and body time to rest and recuperate.

Addressing the past and harmful mindsets

Sometimes, there may be a particular past event or trauma that needs addressing. Perhaps this has sent you into a spiral of unhelpful, stress-inducing thoughts. This is where **therapy** can help. This might mean speaking with a professional therapist

during **cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)**, finding stress relief in **music therapy**, or opening up to the people you love and trust the most.

Forming healthy lifestyle habits

Getting enough sleep, spending time **in nature**, exercising, and making time for creative hobbies are also tried-and-tested ways that help relieve stress and boost your mood.

Smoking and vaping

Long gone are the days when cigarettes were advertised as healthy status symbols. Yet, smoking hasn't fallen out of favour among younger adults as much as health experts had hoped.

In England, a December 2023 study found that the steady decline in smoking of the last 20 years has nearly ground to a halt since the COVID-19 pandemic. This wasn't due to less people giving up smoking, but to more taking up this dangerous habit for the first time¹.

In recent years, a huge cultural trend for e-cigarettes - or vapes - has also raised the alarm among doctors. First welcomed around 20 years ago to help smokers quit, vapes are now also thought to cause life-threatening side-effects.

It's well established that tobacco smoking raises blood pressure, because it makes blood vessels work less efficiently. More recently, studies have shown that the fumes breathed in when vaping have the same effect².

You won't usually have any symptoms if your blood pressure is high. However, even if you feel healthy, high blood pressure is causing potentially life-threatening damage in your body. If you are concerned about your blood pressure or any lifestyle factors that could affect your blood pressure, discuss this with your doctor.

Further reading

1. **BlueCross BlueShield Report: The health of Millennials.**

2. Kim: Millennial blood pressure alert: suboptimal hypertension management in children, adolescents, and young adults.
3. Oliveira da Silva Scaranni et al: Ultra-processed foods, changes in blood pressure and incidence of hypertension.
4. World Health Organization: Salt reduction.
5. House of Commons Library: Obesity statistics.
6. Statista: Obesity in the US.
7. Hall et al: Obesity-induced hypertension.
8. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: How much physical activity do adults need?
9. O'Day and Heimberg: Social media use, social anxiety, and loneliness: a systematic review.
10. Munakata: Clinical significance of stress-related increase in blood pressure: current evidence in office and out-of-office settings.
11. Cancer Research UK: Decline in smoking rates stalled during the pandemic.
12. Springer et al: Impairment of endothelial function by cigarette smoke is not caused by a specific smoke constituent, but by vagal input from the airway.

Article history

The information on this page is peer reviewed by qualified clinicians.

- Next review due: 25 Apr 2027
- 24 Apr 2024 | Originally published

Authored by:

Amberley Davis

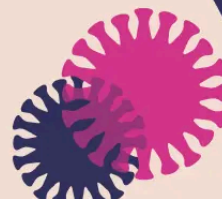
Peer reviewed by

Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCP

Are you protected against flu?

See if you are eligible for a free NHS flu jab today.

[Check now](#)



Feeling unwell?

Assess your symptoms online with our free symptom checker



[Check symptoms](#)

Download the Patient Access app



Follow us



Patient

[About us](#)

[Advertise with us](#)

[Contact us](#)

Legal

[Accessibility statement](#)

[Cookie policy](#)

[Privacy policy](#)

[Terms of use](#)

[Editorial policy](#)

[Authors](#)

Our clinical information meets the standards set by the NHS in their Standard for Creating Health Content guidance. **Read our editorial policy.**

Patient is a part of  **EMIS**

© 2024 Egton Medical Information Systems Limited. All rights reserved.

Registered number: 02117205 Registered office: Fulford Grange, Micklefield Lane, Rawdon, Leeds, LS19 6BA.

Patient is a UK registered trade mark.

Patient does not provide medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.