

The blood pressure mistakes cardiologists wish you'd stop making

From shrugging off 'borderline' readings to overlooking hidden salt in everyday foods, here's what experts want us to be mindful of



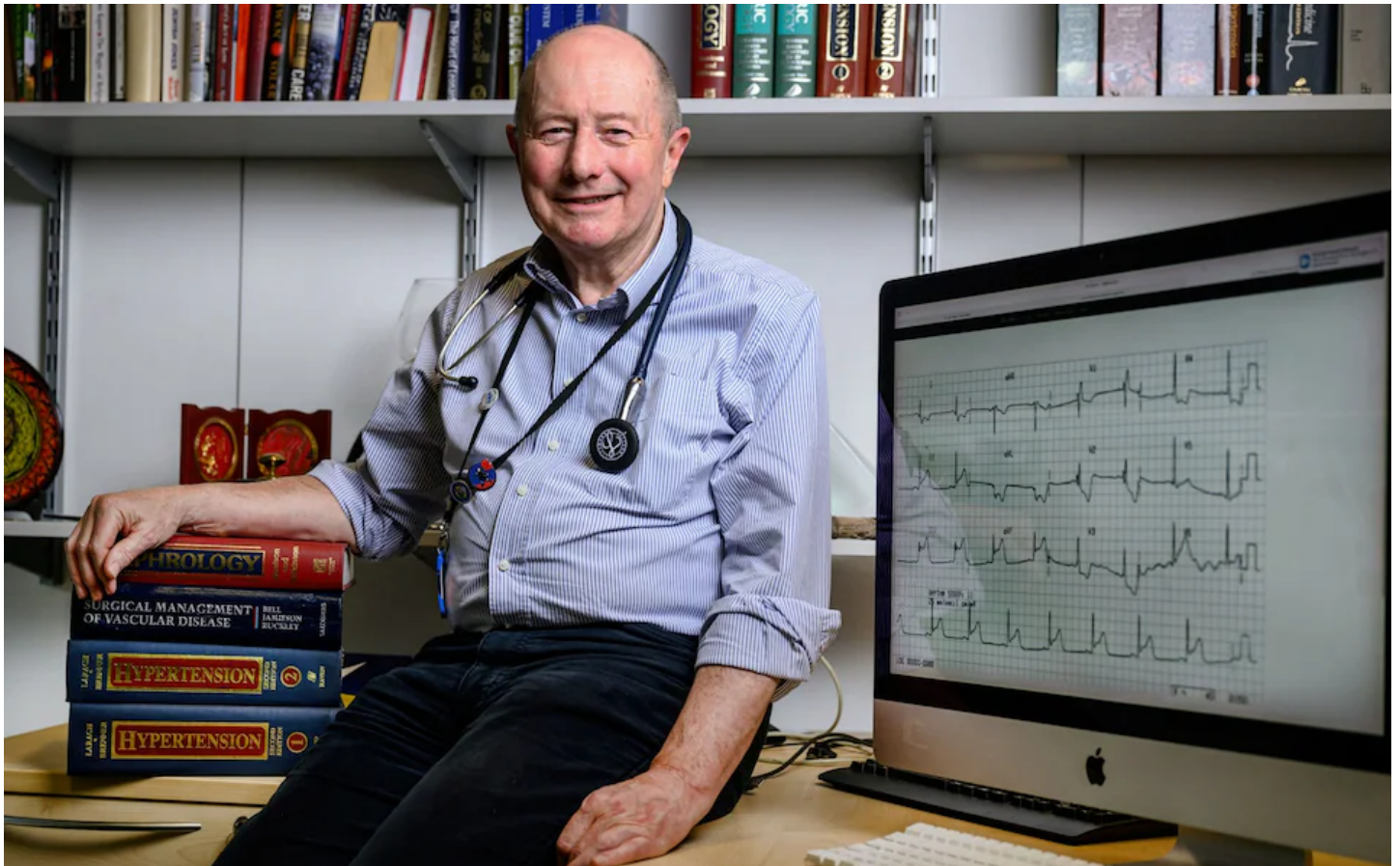
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Prof Tony Heagerty and other cardiologists reveal the measures we can take to keep our blood pressure under control Credit: Paul Cooper

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[High blood pressure](#) is one of medicine's greatest paradoxes. It is among the leading preventable risk factors for heart disease, stroke and premature

death worldwide, yet it rarely causes symptoms. As a result, many people do not realise they have the condition until it has already begun damaging the blood vessels supplying the heart, brain and kidneys.

Around one in three adults in the UK – an estimated 16 million people – have high blood pressure, and many are completely unaware of it.

The encouraging news is that there is plenty we can do to reduce our risk and keep our blood pressure [under control](#). Here, five leading cardiologists share the most common blood pressure mistakes they see in midlife – and the simple changes that can make a real difference.

Ignoring heavy snoring

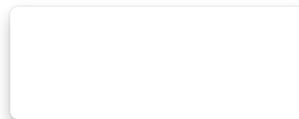
Normally, both blood pressure and heart rate fall by around 10 to 20 per cent during sleep. Known as the “nocturnal dip”, this gives the heart and blood vessels a chance to rest and recover overnight.

However, [heavy snoring](#) or obstructive sleep apnoea interrupts this recovery process. “The muscles in the throat relax too much, blocking the airway and depriving the body of oxygen, causing repeated awakenings throughout the night and preventing this normal overnight blood pressure dip,” says Dr Teresa Castiello, consultant cardiologist and founder of MIAL Healthcare.



Heavy snoring or obstructive sleep apnoea interrupts the beneficial 'nocturnal dip' in blood pressure, explains Dr Teresa Castiello

“When blood pressure and heart rate remain elevated overnight, it can increase the risk of high blood pressure and other health issues including heart failure and even dementia,” she explains.



If you or your partner snores heavily, it's worth getting it checked rather than dismissing it as an inevitable part of ageing. [Obstructive sleep apnoea](#) is often highly treatable with airway devices such as CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure) machines and lifestyle measures including weight loss and, for some people, changing sleep position.

Treating sleep apnoea consistently can help lower blood pressure and reduce strain on the cardiovascular system over time.

Only checking your blood pressure at weekends

Many of us are familiar with “white coat syndrome”, when blood pressure temporarily spikes because of anxiety in the GP's office. It's why doctors often advise measuring blood pressure at home over several days, to [build a more accurate picture](#) of cardiovascular health.

But if you only reach for the monitor when you're relaxed at the weekend or at the end of the day, you could be missing stress-related rises in blood pressure during the working week.

“Some people develop high blood pressure at work or in everyday life when they are stressed, which may not show up at the doctor's surgery or if they only measure their blood pressure at the weekend or in the evening,” says Dr Ali Khavandi, consultant interventional cardiologist at the Royal United Hospital Bath NHS Foundation Trust.



Dr Ali Khavandi advises patients to measure their blood pressure throughout the week Credit: Paul Gillis

“This weekend-only approach creates a ‘best-case scenario’ measurement, hiding stress-related rises in blood pressure that may otherwise go unnoticed,” he explains. “It prevents you from seeing how your daily job strain impacts your cardiovascular system.”

Because high blood pressure rarely causes symptoms, doctors look for patterns over time rather than relying on isolated readings.

Relying on alcohol to relax

So many of us reach for a glass of wine at the end of a stressful working day, forgetting the impact on our heart health.

“High blood pressure and alcohol are best friends,” says Dr Khavandi. “The relationship between [alcohol and blood pressure](#) is dose-dependent, meaning the more you drink the greater the impact,” adds Professor Tony Heagerty, honorary consultant physician at Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, where he runs a hypertension service. “It’s also a risk factor for stroke, independent of its effects on blood pressure.”



Prof Heagerty wants more people to understand the connection between alcohol consumption and high blood pressure
Credit: Paul Cooper

Some studies suggest that even moderate alcohol consumption may contribute to small rises in blood pressure over time in some people. If you drink more than two alcoholic drinks a day, halving your intake can

produce clinically meaningful reductions in blood pressure, with the greatest benefit seen among heavier drinkers, according to [research published in *The Lancet*](#).

“If you find yourself reaching for alcohol as a way to relax, try experimenting with other ways to switch off,” Prof Heagerty advises, “whether that is taking a long bath, going for a walk, or cooking a new recipe”.

Thinking exercise makes you immune

In her clinic, Dr Castiello recalls shocked patients saying: “But doctor, I am highly active, I eat exceptionally well, I do yoga – how can my blood pressure be an issue?” She says: “This highlights the misconception that hypertension is exclusively a third-age affliction or something that only affects sedentary individuals.”

In reality, ageing itself – alongside age-related hormonal changes, including [the menopause in women](#) and declining testosterone levels in some men – can contribute to rising blood pressure, even among people who are otherwise healthy and active. A healthy lifestyle still helps, Dr Castiello stresses, but at these transition points, it isn't always enough on its own.

“Oestrogen naturally helps keep blood vessels flexible and dilated,” explains Dr Nabila Laskar, consultant cardiologist and specialist in cardiac imaging at St Bartholomew’s Hospital. “As its levels decline during menopause, blood vessels can become stiffer and less able to relax, leading to higher blood pressure.”



Dr Nabila Laskar warns that menopause can affect blood pressure, even in healthy, active women

“Reducing the salt in your diet, maintaining a healthy weight and [walking at a brisk pace](#) for at least 150 minutes per week can all help to manage this risk,” Dr Laskar says.

Shrugging off “borderline” blood pressure

While it’s tempting to shrug off a slightly elevated reading as “fine”, you do so at your peril, says Dr Castiello: “This is a dangerous and pervasive myth”.

While a clinic reading of 125/85 mmHg isn’t considered hypertension, it does not mean you are risk-free. “Slightly elevated readings can still signal an increased long-term risk of cardiovascular disease, particularly when combined with other factors such as age, family history, smoking, excess weight or diabetes,” explains Dr Gosia Wamil, consultant cardiologist at Mayo Clinic Healthcare and The Manor Hospital.

The latest European Society of Cardiology (ESC) guidelines, published in 2024, introduced a new category of “elevated blood pressure”, covering clinic readings between 120-139 mmHg systolic or 70-89 mmHg diastolic. This differs from current UK NICE guidance, which uses different thresholds and recommends confirming hypertension with home or ambulatory monitoring. Meanwhile, in the UK, an average home blood pressure reading of 135/85 mmHg or higher is considered high.



Dr Gosia Wamil urges patients to take notice of even slightly elevated blood pressure readings

The good news is that this stage offers an opportunity to act. [Improving your diet](#), exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy weight and reducing alcohol intake can all help prevent blood pressure from rising further and reduce future cardiovascular risk.

Missing the salt hiding in everyday foods

When we think of salty foods, most of us know the obvious culprits: bacon, crisps, takeaways and [adding salt at the table](#). But plenty of everyday foods – including those with a healthy reputation – can also contain surprising amounts of salt, says Dr Wamil.

Canned soups, wholemeal bread, breakfast cereals, some low-fat cheeses – including feta and reduced-fat cheddar – and smoked fish such as kippers and smoked salmon can all contain significant amounts of sodium, which is the main component of salt. Manufacturers often add it to preserve food and enhance flavour.

A typical serving of smoked salmon can provide around 1.5 to 2g of salt – roughly 30 per cent of the recommended maximum daily intake of 6g for an adult.

Over time, eating too much salt can “cause the body to retain more water, increasing total blood volume and forcing the heart to work harder to pump blood while simultaneously stiffening blood vessel walls”, Dr Wamil says.

The best way to manage this risk is to pay closer attention to the foods you eat regularly. UK guidance recommends that adults consume no more than 6g of salt a day (around one teaspoon). Check food labels, choose fresh or frozen whole foods where possible, and look for products labelled “low salt”, “low sodium” or “no added salt”.

Forgetting the damage it can do to your brain

Many people think of high blood pressure as a problem that mainly affects the heart. But persistent hypertension can also [take a toll on the brain](#), increasing the risk of stroke, cognitive decline and dementia.

Dr Khavandi compares undiagnosed high blood pressure to “leaving a tap on and letting it drip in the background for a long period”. Over time, this

constant pressure can silently damage the small blood vessels that supply the brain.

“This vascular damage contributes to vascular dementia and is associated with an increased risk of Alzheimer’s disease,” he explains. While some of this damage may be irreversible, the good news is that controlling blood pressure can significantly reduce the risk of stroke and is associated with a lower risk of cognitive decline over time.

Ultimately, the advice remains reassuringly simple: maintain a healthy weight, stay physically active, eat a balanced diet, limit salt and alcohol, prioritise good sleep and have your blood pressure checked regularly.

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