



British Heart
Foundation
Cymru

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Tackling High Blood Pressure: Wales' Silent Killer



Blood pressure is the pressure of blood in the arteries, which are the vessels (tubes) that carry blood from the heart to the brain and other parts of the body. A certain amount of pressure is needed to get blood moving around the body and it is normal for blood pressure to go up and down throughout the day.

When blood pressure is measured, the reading is presented as two numbers. The first number is the systolic pressure and is the pressure against your arteries when your heart is pumping blood around your body. The second number is the diastolic pressure, which shows how much pressure is in your arteries when your heart relaxes between beats. The reading is measured in millimetres of mercury (mmHg).

Blood pressure becomes a concern when the overall blood pressure remains high, consistently above 140/90mmHg, even when an individual is resting. This means that the heart is working harder to pump blood around the body and can narrow and damage the arteries. The medical term for high blood pressure is 'hypertension', and it means your blood pressure is always too high.

140/90 mmHg

Systolic
pressure

Diastolic
pressure

Millimetres
of mercury



What makes us more likely to have high blood pressure?

In most cases, there isn't a specific reason for the cause of high blood pressure, but an individual may be more at risk if they:

- Are over the age of 65; (although it can affect anyone, at any age)
- Have someone in their family with high blood pressure
- Are someone who smokes
- Consume too much salt or alcohol
- Don't get enough exercise
- Are overweight, especially around their mid-section.

Making lifestyle changes is an effective way of lowering and maintaining a healthy blood pressure. If someone's blood pressure is high or very high, a GP will usually offer medicines on top of lifestyle changes.



In Wales, there are an estimated

750,000

adults with high blood pressure but as many as 220,000 of these could be undiagnosed¹



More than half of heart attacks and strokes in Wales are associated with high blood pressure²



High blood pressure is the leading modifiable risk factor for cardiovascular diseases in Wales³

What are some of the barriers to improving people's blood pressure in Wales?



Lack of awareness

A key barrier to detecting, diagnosing and treating high blood pressure is a lack of public awareness around the importance of knowing your numbers when it comes to heart health. Partly because there are often no symptoms, there is a common misperception that high blood pressure is not a serious concern,^{4,5} when in fact it can lead to serious cardiovascular events, such as heart attack or stroke.



Health system pressures

Detecting, diagnosing and treating high blood pressure is challenging due to the increasing pressures on our health system. The misperception that high blood pressure is not a serious health issue, combined with the current pressures on GPs, means that people with concerns avoid seeking help. Focus groups with patients conducted by BHF Cymru shows that people often fear being a burden on their GPs.



Data

Data on high blood pressure, in Wales, is not robust enough. Currently, we do not know how many people are undiagnosed; BHF estimates that there could be as many as 220,000 people undiagnosed in Wales. In addition, we do not know any information on how individuals with high blood pressure are treated. To save and improve lives and to relieve future pressures on our health system, we need better data. This would enable us to fully understand the scale and nature of the challenge and continue to evidence the importance of investing in better detection, diagnosis and treatment of people with high blood pressure in Wales.



Health inequalities

Research shows that certain populations have been found to be at increased risk of high blood pressure – for example, prevalence in Black communities is significantly higher in the UK.⁶ Socio-economic differences can also negatively impact the prevention of high blood pressure. Healthy eating, exercise, limiting salt intake and not smoking can all reduce the risks; but in Wales, the prevalence of smoking is almost three times higher in the most deprived areas, compared to the least deprived areas.⁷ There are also inequalities present when it comes to age, partly due to a common misperception that high blood pressure only affects older people.⁸ ONS England data reveals that among those with high blood pressure, younger individuals (those aged 25 to 34) with hypertension, were more likely to be undiagnosed than older individuals (those aged 75 years and over).⁹



Taking the right medication

Once individuals have been detected and diagnosed with high blood pressure, taking the right medication at the right time (medication adherence) is crucial to the prevention of major cardiovascular events such as heart attack or stroke. Studies estimate that only 50% of adults with diagnosed high blood pressure fully adhere to their medications.¹⁰ Reasons for non-adherence are complicated, but some include experiencing side effects, or simply forgetting.¹¹ A personalised approach to treating high blood pressure is needed, with the right healthcare professional, in the right location.

How do we tackle the 'silent killer' in Wales?

Ahead of a BHF Cymru blood pressure report being published in summer 2025, our interim findings have indicated that the following actions would bring about progress in tackling high blood pressure in Wales.

An **All-Wales Cardiovascular Disease Prevention Programme** must be developed and implemented, which includes a specific focus on high blood pressure. Priorities should be:



1. Information and communication

This could include a widespread public awareness campaign and a mapping exercise to understand what information is out there and what is easily accessible.



2. Transforming current models of care

This must consider how community and at home blood pressure testing fits in with GP and community pharmacy, to diagnose and treat high blood pressure. It must also include a focus on where wider lifestyle advice and guidance plays a part.



3. Data

We need to fully understand the scale and nature of high blood pressure in Wales, including those currently being treated and those not currently being reached or supported.

For any additional information, please contact edwardsb@bhf.org.uk.

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