

# Indigenous foods that control hypertension

*By: Asunta Simoloka and Prof Rashid Bhikha*

*May 2016*



---

Hypertension, also known as high blood pressure is reaching epidemic levels worldwide. What is concerning about this condition is that in many people hypertension rarely displays symptoms. As a result, a large number of people with high blood pressure are not even aware. Without warning signs, high blood pressure may go undetected while doing a lot of harm to the body which is why high blood pressure has been dubbed the silent killer. In most cases, checking blood pressure is the only way to know your status. High blood pressure comes with serious health complications that include heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease.

Lifestyle factors like diet and exercise play an important role in determining degree of susceptibility to high blood pressure. With a high prevalence of high blood pressure among populations on the typical westernized diet and low incidence of the same condition in rural Africa where people are on the traditional African diet, it is evident that diet weighs heavily on the likelihood of hypertension. The following foods in the traditional African diet have powerful anti hypertensive properties that sustainably keep blood pressure under control.

## **Root vegetables**

Tuberous vegetables like potatoes, sweet potatoes, carrots, and cassava are great allies when it comes to maintaining healthy blood pressure. Rich potassium content is a key attribute shared by tuberous vegetables. High intake of potassium rich food is an important aspect with regards to achieving desired blood pressure status. Potassium ensures proper fluid balance and is effective for removing excess sodium from the body in order to create an ideal ratio between potassium and sodium as required by the body to maintain normal blood pressure.

Latest studies even indicate that for controlling blood pressure, increasing potassium intake is more viable than severely restricting salt intake. It is definitely wise to control intake of salt, a source of sodium which can lead to high blood pressure if eaten excessively. However, there is also danger in taking less salt than the body needs. Too little salt gives rise to other problems such as electrolyte imbalance. So a combination of controlled salt intake and increased amount of potassium rich foods works well for maintaining blood pressure.

## **Amaranth plant**

The amaranth plant is known scientifically as *amaranthus*. In South Africa, amaranth goes by different local names including pigweed, misbredie, marog, tepe, thepe, serepelele, theepe, umfino, imbuya, or utyutu. Both the leaves and seeds of the amaranth plant are edible and they deliver several health benefits that include keeping blood pressure under control.

Amaranth, especially the seeds, is rich in omega 3 fatty acids which are essential for heart health and blood pressure control because they lower bad cholesterol while elevating good cholesterol. Well balanced cholesterol minimizes plaque buildup in blood vessels which may interfere with blood flow to the heart. Promoting heart health is a major priority for people with high blood pressure because hypertension does a lot of damage to the heart. Any measures that are heart-friendly have a tremendously positive influence on preventing heart related health complications. Omega 3 fats are also known to minimize inflammation. Uncontrolled inflammation is believed to be a risk factor for many chronic illnesses including hypertension. Amaranth leaves can be prepared and eaten like spinach

## **Legumes**

Diets rich in legumes lower the risk of disease of any kind. Beans, peas, lentils, and peanuts are collectively referred to as legumes or pulses. Rich in protein, legumes are far healthier than meat which is linked to an increased risk of hypertension. The prevalence of high blood pressure is dramatically lower among people who eat more legumes and less meat. Fiber is one of the nutrients responsible for the anti hypertensive attributes of legumes. Research has continued to show that fiber-rich diets are instrumental for regulating blood pressure. Fiber improves cholesterol balance, promotes heart health, and lowers the risk for stroke. All these effects of fiber are essential for preventing or minimizing the harmful impact of health complications caused by high blood pressure.

Peanuts are rich in healthy monounsaturated fats which lower bad cholesterol as well as increasing good cholesterol. This reflects the abundance of cardio protective benefits offered by legume-rich diets. What's more, legumes have magnesium which functions as a vasodilator, keeping blood vessels relaxed and opened up. This keeps blood pressure under control and improves blood flow to the heart and brain, thereby cutting the risk of stroke. Researchers also say that magnesium is powerful enough to minimize the harmful impact of stroke.

Legumes are really versatile and convenient in terms of preparation and how they are eaten. Lentils cook quickly and they can be made into a stew by simply adding grated carrots, onions, and spices during preparation. For some tasty lentil soup, you just need to boil lentils with carrots, potatoes, tomato, and any other healthy additions. To make a lentil salad, just add a bit of vinegar, onion, and any other spices to boiled lentils.

### **Wild mushrooms**

Wild mushrooms are incredibly healthy and they make a massive contribution towards controlling blood pressure. Wild mushrooms are rich in vitamin D, an important nutrient for regulating blood pressure. Additionally, vitamin D is required for the absorption of calcium, another nutrient found in mushrooms and strongly linked to healthy blood pressure. Besides, mushrooms are very high in antioxidants. The presence of antioxidants in the body is essential for maintaining normal blood pressure. Fiber is also abundantly present in mushrooms and this only adds to the antihypertensive abilities of mushrooms.

Vitamin D is a fat soluble nutrient, so adding a healthy fat to mushrooms or eating them with a fat containing food is important for proper absorption of vitamin D. Mushrooms are eaten fresh or dried and in much the same way other vegetables are eaten. Local names for mushrooms include ngowa, ikhowe, and sampioen.

In addition to the foods that have been profiled, there are so many more foods in the traditional African diet that are helpful for managing blood pressure. And ultimately, the benefits come from a healthy diet in general as opposed to individual foods.

## Further reading

[cookieandkate.com/2015/vegan-lentil-soup-recipe/](http://cookieandkate.com/2015/vegan-lentil-soup-recipe/)

[www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/mujadara-51100640](http://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/mujadara-51100640)

[allrecipes.com/recipe/15559/black-beans-and-rice/](http://allrecipes.com/recipe/15559/black-beans-and-rice/)

[www.webmd.com/hypertension-high-blood-pressure/news/20140626/low-vitamin-d-levels-linked-to-high-blood-pressure](http://www.webmd.com/hypertension-high-blood-pressure/news/20140626/low-vitamin-d-levels-linked-to-high-blood-pressure)