

Living Well With A Brain Aneurysm

Our guide has been reviewed by neuro professionals working in the NHS today. This is a guide for your information and consideration and does not constitute medical advice. We always recommend you discuss any concerns or medical worries with your GP and/or relevant consultant. All aneurysms are different, every person is unique, and we always advise you speak to your neuro specialist, consultant or GP if you have any specific concerns or questions.

We're here to help you live as well as possible with your aneurysm. Although some risk factors are genetic or related to underlying conditions, many can be related to lifestyle, especially **high blood pressure** and **smoking**. These are the areas where you can take real, positive action.

Even after preventative or emergency treatment, keeping blood vessels healthy is one of the best things you can do to prevent future problems, not just in the brain, but for your heart and overall wellbeing too.

One of the most effective ways to do that is by making small, sustainable changes that support your overall vascular health. What is good for the heart is good for the brain too.

Simple changes, done consistently, can make a difference.

1. Blood pressure: the most important number

High blood pressure (hypertension) is the leading risk factor for aneurysm rupture. That's because it puts pressure on the artery walls, including any weakened areas like an aneurysm.

Aim for a *long-term* average blood pressure below 140/90 mmHg, or lower if advised by your doctor.

Get your blood pressure checked regularly – at the GP, a pharmacy, or with a home monitor. Don't worry too much about a one-off blip, it's the long-term trend that is important. Keep a diary at home and share this with your GP as this is the most useful way to inform your blood pressure management.

Reducing Blood Pressure

- Lose weight if you are overweight
- Follow the advice in this leaflet on exercise, smoking and alcohol
- Cut back on caffeine if you're sensitive to it – it can cause temporary spikes.
- Reduce salt: aim for under 6g per day (about 1 teaspoon). Watch for hidden salt in processed foods, sauces and bread.

2. Stop smoking

Smoking tobacco (cigarettes, cigars and pipe tobacco) can significantly increase your risk of developing a brain aneurysm.

Exactly why smoking increases the risk of brain aneurysms is unclear, but studies show the majority of people diagnosed with a brain aneurysm smoke, or have done so in the past. It may be that the harmful substances in tobacco smoke damage the walls of your blood vessels. The risk is particularly high in people with a family history of brain aneurysm.

The NHS offers lots of [support to stop smoking](#) and their advisors can provide a range of proven methods to help you quit including nicotine replacement therapy such as patches or gum, medicines designed to break the addiction and support sessions.

At this time there is no evidence that vaping affects brain aneurysms due to no research yet and the relatively short time vaping has been available. If you do vape, you may want to discuss this with your GP or specialist next time you speak to them for advice.

3. Medication and drugs

- Always take medications exactly as prescribed. Don't start or stop any drugs without discussing them with your doctor—especially if you're managing an aneurysm.
- Speak to your doctor before taking NSAIDs (like ibuprofen, naproxen) as they may increase bleeding risk, especially if you're also taking blood thinners or have high blood pressure.
- Blood thinners (such as warfarin or direct oral anticoagulants) reduce your blood's ability to clot, which can worsen bleeding if an aneurysm ruptures.
- Illegal stimulants (e.g. cocaine, amphetamines) dramatically raise blood pressure and can weaken vessel walls, increasing the risk of aneurysm growth or rupture.

4. Eating well for vascular and brain health

Food plays a powerful role in protecting your arteries, brain and heart. A Mediterranean-style way of eating is especially beneficial, helping to lower cholesterol, regulate blood pressure, and support healthy circulation. If you've been prescribed statins or cholesterol-lowering medication, take them as advised by your doctor.

There's no perfect diet for everyone, and cholesterol levels can vary by sex, age and genetics. But some clear steps can help most people:

- Choose healthy fats like olive oil, avocado, oily fish (salmon, sardines, mackerel) and nuts and cut back on saturated fats such as butter, fatty meats, cream and processed snacks
- Eat more fibre – wholegrains, lentils, fruit and vegetables help remove excess cholesterol
- Go for wholegrain carbs over white or refined ones
- Include lean protein such as beans, tofu, fish, lean meats or chicken
- Minimise highly processed and packaged foods

5. Alcohol: what's safe?

Although researchers don't believe alcohol has a direct impact on rupture risk, drinking alcohol in excess can raise blood pressure and interfere with medications. If you've had a brain bleed or are on blood thinners or anti-seizure medications, your doctor may recommend limiting alcohol further. The general advice is to stick to NHS alcohol guidelines.



- Stick to **under 14 units per week** (that's about 6 small glasses of wine or pints of beer).
- Have **2–3 alcohol-free days per week**.
- Be mindful that alcohol can **increase anxiety, affect sleep and impair balance** — which can be more noticeable after a brain injury.

Talk to your healthcare team about what's safe for you personally, recommendations can vary depending on your medical history, medication and treatment.

6. Activities, movement and exercise

Regular movement and exercise support healthy blood flow, help lower blood pressure, and boost mental wellbeing. If you have an unruptured brain aneurysm, staying active can be beneficial.

Ideally, you should be aiming for 30 minutes of aerobic exercise (where you are out of breath) daily or regularly each week to increase your fitness. This could include anything like walking, jogging, cycling, swimming, and include Yoga, Pilates, or body weight exercises. Start small and increase gradually - it's important to pace yourself and choose activities that feel manageable for you and fit in with your lifestyle.

Can I still have sex? There is a *very slight* increase in risk with anything that significantly raises blood pressure but to put that into perspective, you would need to avoid 6  e  s of intercourse to prevent one rupture. This means the risk is *very, very small* and should not stop you enjoying sex.

Can I play team sports like football, netball or hockey? Yes, these are fine. There are no known links between head injuries from sport and aneurysm formation or rupture.

What about weightlifting or high-intensity training? As with the risks associated with sex, there is a very slight increased risk with anything that significantly raises blood pressure. Consider swapping low reps and high intensity for higher reps and lower intensity.

Scuba diving may not be safe due to the pressure changes involved. You will need to be medically assessed before diving by the dive organisers.

Flying is considered safe. Brain aneurysms are not included on the American Medical Association's list of conditions that make flying risky, and it is considered safe to fly.

7. Mental health, stress and sleep

Living with an unruptured brain aneurysm or recovering after a hemorrhage can bring up a wide range of emotions: fear, anxiety, worry. You're not alone in feeling this way, and while specialist mental health support can be hard to access, there are things that can help, and places to start:

How to care for your mind:

- **Talk to someone** — a friend, therapist, or support group. You don't have to go through it alone.
- **Use calming techniques** — deep breathing, mindfulness, journaling or listening to music.
- **Prioritise sleep** — aim for 7–9 hours per night. Try to keep a consistent sleep–wake routine.
- **Set small daily goals** to create a sense of progress and structure.

You can find further support in our [Living with Health Anxiety Guide](#) and through [RareMinds](#), a mental health service for people with rare and chronic conditions.

8. Ongoing monitoring and screening

If you've been diagnosed with an unruptured aneurysm, are recovering after treatment, or have a strong family history (especially two or more first-degree relatives affected), your medical team may recommend:

- Regular scans (usually MRI or MRA)
- Medication reviews
- Blood pressure and cholesterol checks

Always seek urgent medical advice if you experience:

- A sudden, severe headache (often described as a "thunderclap")
- Vision changes
- Confusion, speech issues or weakness
- Fainting or seizures

These may be signs of complications, don't wait.

9. You're not alone

This journey can feel overwhelming, but support is here, from healthcare professionals, community groups, and others who've walked a similar path.

HBA Support is a community for people affected by brain aneurysms, because no one should face this alone.

More information and support

HBA Support is here to support you and your family through your journey. We have lots more information available to individuals and their families. Please take a look at our support pages to find out more:

<https://www.hbasupport.org/support>

References

- NHS: [Brain Aneurysm Prevention](#)
- The Walton Centre: [Brain Aneurysms and Screening](#)
- NHS Lothian: [Information for adults considering screening for brain aneurysm](#)
- HBA Support: Brain Aneurysms: [Causes, Symptoms, Diagnosis, Treatment, and FAQs](#)
- Natalie Kate Moss Foundation: [6 Ways to Lower Blood Pressure](#)
- NHS: [Alcohol advice - NHS](#)

Sincere thanks to Professor Bulters for his support in creating this patient guide.