

HABISCUS SABDARIFFA: HOW TO SIP YOUR WAY TO LOWER BLOOD PRESSURE

You are sitting in traffic, inching along on your way home from work. You've already put in two hours of overtime and still have a long list of "to dos" for when you get home....you can already feel the agitation coursing throughout your veins.

Then your cell phone rings and it's your spouse telling you that the pipes just burst and the plumber cannot get there until tomorrow morning. To add insult to injury, the next car over just cut you off.

Your heart starts racing, your head starts throbbing, and your blood pressure shoots through the roof. To make matters worse, this is not a position you can afford to be in.

You already have high blood pressure and lifestyle modifications haven't helped much. Of course, if you're being *completely* honest, you haven't really been as diligent as you could be with the diet or the exercise.

Yet you don't want to start taking blood pressure medication, which you've heard can have nasty side effects. So what can you do?

The answer is actually pretty simple. Sit back and brew some tea. That's right, tea.

Sip Your Way to Lower Blood Pressure?

From Iran and Northern Africa to Sri Lanka and the tropics, the answer to lower blood pressure may be growing outside houses, in parks, and around office buildings. It's the hibiscus flower.

This gorgeous flower, often associated with Hawaii, has been a traditional remedy for high blood pressure in many countries. Most often, the flowers are dried and then steeped in water to make hibiscus tea (or "sour tea" if you are in Iran).

But does this home remedy hold up to scientific scrutiny? Let's find out.

The Gold Standard Makes the Case...

The research on the use of hibiscus for treating high blood pressure is quite impressive. In one randomized, controlled study, researchers tested to see how hibiscus tea compared to captopril, a well-known pharmaceutical blood pressure medication.¹

Researchers divided 75 people with high blood pressure into two groups. The first group drank 16 ounces of hibiscus tea each morning. The second group took 25 mg of captopril twice a day.

At the end of one month, 79% of the participants who drank the tea had a reduction of at least 10 points in their diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number). 84% of the participants in the medication group also saw a reduction of at least 10 points in their diastolic pressure.

That means that the tea worked just as well as the medication. Naturally. The only aspect of this study that could be improved upon would be the small sample size.

Following up on this study, the researchers decided to do a second study to test the effects of hibiscus against lisinopril, another known blood pressure lowering drug, with a larger participant pool.²

In this randomized, double-blind study, researchers divided 193 participants with mild to moderate high blood pressure into two groups. The first received a hibiscus extract, standardized to 250 mg of total anthocyanins (the active component of hibiscus), each day. The second group received 10 mg of lisinopril daily.

At the end of four weeks, those receiving the hibiscus had a statistically significant decrease in blood pressure as compared to the medication group. In fact, they dropped an average of 17 points in their systolic (top number) pressure and 12 points in their diastolic (bottom number) pressure.

Plus, participants who took hibiscus saw their sodium levels decrease, but not their potassium. This is critical, as too much sodium can elevate blood pressure levels, while potassium is needed to keep blood pressure levels in check. Some high blood pressure medications can lower potassium to dangerous levels. And the hibiscus extract was found to be 100% safe and well tolerated.

This is all to say that a gold-standard study deemed the natural treatment not only safe, but more effective than the pharmaceutical. Now, that's Mother Nature at her best.

As if That Wasn't Enough...

Lastly, a third randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled study tested three 240 mL servings of hibiscus tea a day against an innocuous brew in 65 patients with mild to moderate high blood pressure.³

At the end of six weeks, those who drank the hibiscus tea had a statistically greater reduction in systolic blood pressure, as compared to the placebo group. Moreover, the higher a person's systolic pressure was to begin with, the greater his or her reduction.

The diastolic pressure was also lower in the hibiscus group, but not significantly lower as compared to the placebo group.

Researchers concluded, “These results suggest that daily consumption of hibiscus tea, in an amount readily incorporated into the diet, lowers [blood pressure] in pre- and mildly hypertensive adults.”

Once again, the gold standard strikes gold. Clearly hibiscus tea works to lower blood pressure levels naturally.

So What’s the Catch?

How long do you have to drink hibiscus tea to enjoy it’s blood pressure lowering benefits? Let’s find out.

A randomized, placebo-controlled study from Iran tested the effects of hibiscus tea (called sour tea in their experiment) on 54 patients with moderate high blood pressure.⁴

Half of the participants drank hibiscus tea while the other group drank an arbitrary warm beverage. After 15 days, those who drank the hibiscus tea had an average of 11.2 percent decrease in systolic pressure and 10.7 percent decrease in diastolic pressure. These reductions were statistically significant when compared to the placebo group.

However, three days after the participants stopped drinking the hibiscus tea, their blood pressure levels began to slowly rise again. Their systolic pressure was elevated by 7.9 percent and the diastolic pressure rose by 5.6 percent from their post-treatment lows.

Again, a gold standard study makes the case for hibiscus tea. But it also shows that you must make the tea part of your daily life to enjoy the blood pressure lowering benefits.

Enjoying the Warming Benefits of Hibiscus Tea

What could possibly be easier, and apparently more effective, for lowering your blood pressure than drinking hibiscus tea?

The tea is generally made from the dried flowers of the plant. If you choose to give hibiscus a try, it is critical that you use pure *Hibiscus sabdariffa*, which is the type of hibiscus used in the studies.

You’ll also want to make sure the tea is organic, whenever possible, and that it is free of toxic chemicals and pollutants, such as synthetic fertilizers. Ideally, you’ll also want to buy from a manufacturer who supports and uses fair trade practices.

When making the tea, you can either add a heaping tablespoon of the dried plant infused into about a quart of boiling water or boil a couple of flowers gently in a saucepan of water until the water turns deep red (about 15 minutes). The tea can also be stored in the refrigerator.

So, if blood pressure is a concern for you, make hibiscus tea your new drink of choice. And while you're at it, why not add a tiny umbrella to honor your heart-healthy beverage's native roots.

But, as noted in the last study mentioned, sipping hibiscus tea is not a magic bullet—it only works to lower your blood pressure so long as you continue to drink it.

To permanently lower your blood pressure, you need to make fundamental changes to your lifestyle, including eating nutrient-dense, whole foods, engaging in moderate daily exercise, and, of course, learning to relax!

References:

¹Herrera-Arellano, A et al. "Effectiveness and tolerability of a standardized extract from Hibiscus sabdariffa in patients with mild to moderate hypertension: a controlled and randomized clinical trial." *Phytomedicine*. 2004 Jul;11(5):375-82.

²Herrera-Arellano, A et al. "Clinical effects produced by a standardized herbal medicinal product of Hibiscus sabdariffa on patients with hypertension. A randomized, double-blind, lisinopril-controlled clinical trial. *Planta Med*. 2007 Jan;73(1):6-12.

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