

What You Need to Know About High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure – hypertension – is known as the silent killer because it usually doesn't have any symptoms. Most people don't realize they have high blood pressure until other health problems develop.

Hypertension is diagnosed when blood pressure readings taken at several different times consistently show levels higher than 130/80. Making healthy lifestyle changes can help lower blood pressure, but once you have been diagnosed with it, you will need to manage it for the rest of your life.

Measuring blood pressure

Your blood pressure is a measure of how hard the blood that's moving through your arteries pushes against the walls of the arteries. It's important to know your blood pressure because high blood pressure can harm your health.

Blood pressure is measured in units of millimeters of mercury (mmHg). A blood pressure reading is 2 numbers, 1 over the other, such as 120/70 mmHg. The top number is the pressure of blood against the artery walls during a heartbeat – it is called the systolic measurement. The bottom number, called the diastolic measurement, is the pressure of the blood against the artery walls between heartbeats.

Your blood pressure falls into 1 of the following categories:

- Normal – lower than 120/lower than 80 mmHg
- Elevated (prehypertensive) – 120-139/80-89 mmHg
- High – 140/90 mmHg and higher

Blood pressure is considered high when either or both of the systolic and diastolic numbers are in the high range. Talk with your healthcare provider to find out what your blood goal is.

High blood pressure can cause health problems

In a healthy artery, the blood moves smoothly and puts normal pressure on its walls. High blood pressure damages the artery walls and causes scar tissue to build as the artery heals. The scar tissue makes the artery stiff and weak. Plaque also sticks to the scar tissue, making the arteries narrower and harder.

High blood pressure:

- Causes your heart to work harder to distribute blood to your body.
- Raises your risk for heart attack, heart failure and stroke.
- Can lead to kidney disease and blindness.

Controlling high blood pressure

If you have high blood pressure, your healthcare provider will work with you to make a plan to lower it. If lifestyle changes aren't enough, they may prescribe medication to help control your blood pressure. Use these lifestyle changes that may help lower your blood pressure:

- Eat a heart-healthy diet.
- Reduce your sodium intake to no more than 2,300 mg per day and no more than 1,500 for the most benefit.
- Stay at a healthy weight.
- Exercise regularly – 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of high-intensity activity a week.
- Quit smoking.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink.
- Manage your stress. High blood pressure is not the same as stress.

High blood pressure risk factors

When it comes to risk factors for hypertension, there are some you can control and some you can't. Changing the risk factors you can control is important to keeping your blood pressure in check.

Factors you can't control:

- Family history of high blood pressure or heart disease in one or both of your parents or grandparents.
- Gender, age and race – men over age 55, postmenopausal women and African Americans

Factors you can control:

- Eating a healthy diet
- Having no more than 1 alcoholic drink a day for women or 2 drinks a day for men
- Not smoking or being regularly exposed to secondhand smoke
- Getting regular exercise
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Managing your stress levels

High blood pressure and peripheral arterial disease (PAD)

Peripheral arterial disease (PAD) is a disease that occurs when extra cholesterol and other fats collect in the walls of the arteries that supply blood to your limbs. If you have PAD, it's likely that arteries in other parts of your body are diseased as well, which puts you at higher risk for heart attack and other issues. High blood pressure makes it easier for plaque to build up in your arteries and can contribute to PAD by reducing blood flow throughout your body.

