



High Blood Pressure

What is normal blood pressure?

Doctors check your blood pressure much like they check weight or temperature. It is a measure of your body's health. Many things can influence blood pressure: weight, race, genetic factors, hormones, diet, and lifestyle. Blood pressure tends to rise naturally as we age. And it can jump temporarily with anger or stress. It can even vary depending on the time of day – usually it's at its lowest during the evening.

How is blood pressure measured?

A doctor, nurse, or other health care provider measures your blood pressure by placing a cuff around your arm and inflating it with air. This squeezes a major blood vessel in the arm. Using a stethoscope and a pressure gauge, the nurse takes two measurements while releasing air from the cuff: systolic pressure and diastolic pressure.

The systolic number is the amount of pressure your heart uses to pump blood through the vessels. The diastolic number is the pressure exerted when your heart is at rest (between beats).

A blood pressure reading looks like this:

118 = systolic pressure
78 = diastolic pressure

What is high blood pressure?

High blood pressure – also called hypertension – is an increase in pressure in the vessels as the heart pumps through them. This high pressure narrows the blood vessels and overworks the heart. Hypertension often is called a “silent disease” because people who have it do not have noticeable symptoms.

The National Institutes of Health tell us that:

- A normal blood pressure is less than 120/80

- Prehypertension describes people with a blood pressure between 120 to 139 systolic and 80-89 diastolic. Only one of the numbers, the top or the bottom, needs to be high for you to meet the criteria for prehypertension. Those in the prehypertension range are at higher risk than those with lower blood pressures and are much more likely to move into the hypertension range where medication is required. However, lifestyle changes can help those with prehypertension.
- A blood pressure equal to or greater than 140/90 is hypertension and you should see a doctor to help you with treatment.

Remember: The higher the blood pressure, the greater the chance of serious problems such as heart attacks and strokes.



Can I control my blood pressure?

High blood pressure cannot be cured, but there are things you can do to prevent it – or to control it if you already have it.

- **Don't smoke cigarettes or use tobacco products.** A person who stops smoking can reduce the risk for high blood pressure and many other serious diseases.
- **Take your blood pressure medications as prescribed.**
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** Eat a low-fat diet.
- **Limit your salt intake.** Avoid salty foods and don't use excessive salt in cooking.
- **Drink alcohol in moderation.** Alcoholic beverages are high in calories, and heavy drinkers may forget to take their blood pressure medication.
- **Get more exercise.** Even moderate activity like walking 20 minutes three times a week can help you lose weight and reduce stress.
- **See your doctor for regular health checkups.**
- If you are a woman nearing or in menopause, ask your doctor if hormone replacement therapy is right for you.

Know your blood pressure

Have it checked regularly. Take your medication exactly as prescribed; don't run out of pills even for a single day. Take medication at the same time every day, and never stop taking your medication without first discussing it with your doctor.

If you need help

See your physician to develop a stress management routine that is right for you. Your physician is your best source of medical advice.

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