

BLOOD PRESSURE AND STROKE

Take note and take control

Even if you've never been someone who likes to take control of a situation, it's important to take control of hypertension, commonly known as high blood pressure.

Doing so may help lower your risk of heart attack and heart failure. And it can also help protect you from another serious health problem—stroke.

According to the American Heart Association (AHA), stroke is the No. 3 cause of death in America. It's also a leading cause of disability. High blood pressure, the AHA reports, is the single most important stroke risk factor.

By the numbers Blood pressure measures the force of blood flow on

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the walls of your blood vessels. There are two numbers in a blood pressure reading. The first shows systolic pressure, when your heart is beating. The second number is diastolic pressure, when your heart is at rest between beats.

Blood pressure categories, listed in millimeters of mercury (mm Hg), are as follows:

➤ **Normal.** 119 or less systolic/79 or less diastolic.

➤ **Prehypertension.** 120 to 139 systolic/80 to 89 diastolic. Prehypertension means you're at risk for high blood pressure and should take steps to protect yourself.

➤ **Stage 1 hypertension.** 140 to 159 systolic/90 to 99 diastolic.

➤ **Stage 2 hypertension.** 160 or higher systolic/100 or higher diastolic.

The stroke connection High blood pressure raises stroke risk because it causes blood vessel walls to thicken and deteriorate. As a result, cholesterol or other substances can break away from the vessels and block blood flow to the brain. This is called an ischemic stroke.

High blood pressure can also weaken vessel walls, causing them to rupture. This type of stroke is a hemorrhagic stroke. Generally, the higher your blood pressure, the greater the health risks.

Know where you stand

It's possible to have high blood pressure without having symptoms. That's why regular blood pressure checks are so important. The American Academy of Family Physicians recommends that adults get their blood pressure checked at least every two years—more often for those who've had abnormal blood pressure readings in the past. Ask your doctor how often you need to get your blood pressure checked.



Usually doctors can't tell why someone has high blood pressure. But they can help bring it down.

According to the National Stroke Association, your doctor may recommend a low-fat, low-salt diet that's rich in fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. Your doctor may also suggest getting regular exercise. By itself, exercise can lower blood pressure. But it can also help you maintain a healthy weight. That's important because being overweight is a risk factor for hypertension.

Other lifestyle changes your doctor may recommend might include learning to relax, avoiding caffeine and smoking, and knowing the risks of drinking alcohol.

He or she may also prescribe medications. Sometimes it takes awhile to find the medicines that work best. But doing what your doctor suggests is worth the effort. Taking charge of your blood pressure may mean taking control of your risk for a stroke.