



# What Is High Blood Pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against blood vessel walls. High blood pressure (HBP) means the pressure in your arteries is higher than it should be. Another name for high blood pressure is hypertension.



Blood pressure is written as two numbers, such as 112/78 mm Hg. The top, systolic, number is the pressure when the heart beats. The bottom, diastolic, number is the pressure when the heart rests between beats. Normal blood pressure is below 120/80 mm Hg. If you're an adult and your systolic pressure is 120 to 139, or your diastolic pressure is 80 to 89 (or both), you have "prehypertension." High blood pressure is a pressure of 140 systolic or higher and/or 90 diastolic or higher that stays high over time.

No one knows exactly what causes most cases of high blood pressure. It can't be cured, but it can be managed. High blood pressure usually has no signs or symptoms. That's why it is so dangerous."

About 80 million Americans over age 20, 1 in 3 adults, have it, and many don't even know they have it. Not treating high blood pressure is dangerous. High blood pressure increases the risk of heart attack and stroke. You can live a healthier life if you treat and manage it!

Make sure you get your blood pressure checked regularly and treat it the way your doctor advises.

## Who is at higher risk?

- People with close blood relatives who have HBP
- African Americans
- Overweight or obese people
- People who aren't physically active
- People who consume too much sodium (salt)
- People who drink too much alcohol
- People with diabetes, gout or kidney disease
- Pregnant women
- Women who take birth control pills, who are overweight, had HBP during pregnancy, have a family history of HBP or have mild kidney disease

In general, the older you get, the greater your chance of developing HBP.

## How can I tell I have it?

You usually can't tell! Many people have it and don't know it. The only way to know if your blood pressure is high is to get it checked regularly by your doctor.

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### What can untreated high blood pressure lead to?

- Stroke
- Heart attack, angina or both
- Heart failure
- Kidney failure
- Peripheral arterial disease (PAD)

### What can I do about it?

- Reach and maintain a healthy weight.
- Eat healthy meals low in saturated fat, *trans* fat, sodium (salt) and added sugars.
- Limit alcohol to no more than one drink per day for women or two drinks a day for men.
- Be more physically active. If you have high blood pressure, aim for at least 40 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity at least 3 to 4 times a week.
- Take medicine the way your doctor tells you.
- Know what your blood pressure should be and work to keep it at that level.



### How can medicine help?

Some medicines, such as vasodilators, help relax and open up your blood vessels so blood can flow through better. A diuretic can help keep your body from holding too much water and salt. Other medicines help your heart beat more slowly and with less force.

### HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call **1-800-AHA-USA1** (1-800-242-8721), or visit **heart.org** to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up to get *Heart Insight*, a free magazine for heart patients and their families, at **heartinsight.org**.
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at **heart.org/supportnetwork**.

### Do you have questions for the doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write your questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider.

For example:

**Will I always have to take medicine?**

**What should my blood pressure be?**

### My Questions:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one. Visit **heart.org/answersbyheart** to learn more.