

High Blood Pressure

One in five Americans have high blood pressure (sometimes called **hypertension**). You can have high blood pressure and still feel fine. That is because high blood pressure does not cause symptoms that you can see or feel. The good news is that there are ways you can prevent high blood pressure and control it if you already have it.

What Is Blood Pressure?



The blood pressure reading tells your doctor the pressure or force of the blood flowing through your blood vessels as your heart beats. Two numbers are read.

- **Systolic.** The first, or top, number (the highest) is your systolic blood pressure, which tells you how much the blood flowing through your blood vessels pushes against the vessel walls as your heart beats.
 - **Diastolic.** The second (lower) number is your diastolic blood pressure. It shows the remaining pressure when the heart is resting between beats.
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What Do the Numbers Tell Me?

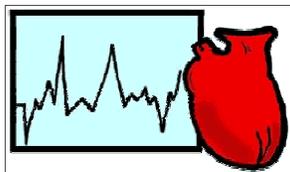
Normal readings are less than 120 for the systolic (top) pressure, and less than 80 for the diastolic (bottom). For example, your pressure may be 119 (top) over 79 (bottom). This is written as 119/79.

Slightly high numbers, such as 125/83, mean you have **prehypertension**, that you might develop high blood pressure. Your doctor will probably ask you to make changes to your daily habits or diet to lower the numbers.

A top number of 140 or higher, with a bottom number of 90 or higher at 2 or more check-ups means you have **high blood pressure**. The doctor will probably suggest medicine, changes in your diet, and exercise.

If only 1 number is high, you have **isolated systolic hypertension**. It is treated the same as high blood pressure.

What Causes High Blood Pressure?



You may be at risk for high blood pressure if anyone else in your family has the condition. The risk increases if you have other health concerns, such as smoking, obesity, and diabetes. High blood pressure can be caused by other diseases as well.

It is important to have regular blood pressure checks. Even though your blood pressure may be high, you probably will not feel sick. You will only know it is high when it is checked.

High blood pressure is a major health concern. If not treated, it can lead to stroke, heart disease, eye problems, or kidney failure. Even slightly high blood pressure can cause kidney and heart problems over time, or dementia.

How Can I Prevent or Control High Blood Pressure?



Try these healthy habits to help you control or prevent high blood pressure.

- **Keep a healthy weight.** Being overweight adds to your risk of high blood pressure. Losing as little as 5 pounds will help. Ask your doctor if you need to lose weight.
- **Exercise.** Walking just 30 minutes every other day can help. But check with your doctor before starting.
- **Eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy foods.** A healthy diet is important. To control high blood pressure, eat a diet rich in these foods.
- **Cut down on salt and sodium.** A low-salt diet might help lower your blood pressure. Talk with your doctor about your salt intake.
- **Drink less alcohol.** Drinking alcohol can affect your blood pressure. Body size makes a difference. Generally, men should only have 2 drinks a day; women only 1.

What Else Can I Do?

Your doctor may also have you take medicine to control your blood pressure, and you may need to take it for the rest of your life.

If this happens, remember that a healthy lifestyle may mean you need to take fewer medications, or smaller doses. Healthy eating and the right activity will improve your blood pressure and lessen your chances of other health problems.

Resources

Organization

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI)

Office of the Director

Building 31, Room 5A52

31 Center Drive MSC 2486

Bethesda, MD 20892

Phone: (301) 592-8573

TTY: (240) 629-3255

Fax: (240) 629-3246

Web site: www.nhlbi.nih.gov

Information on high blood pressure. Go to Health Information, "H" and then "High Blood Pressure."

Web Sites

www.americanheart.org

Information for the public on a range of topics related to heart health.

www.familydoctor.org

Information for the public on a wide variety of health topics.

www.mayoclinic.com

Health information for the public to help manage their health.

www.medlineplus.gov

Up-to-date, quality health care information. Go to Health Topics, "High Blood Pressure."