



BLOOD PRESSURE MATTERS

Keeping Hypertension in Check

About 1 in 3 adults in the U.S. has high blood pressure, but many don't realize it. High blood pressure is sometimes called a "silent killer," because it usually has no warning signs, yet it can lead to life-threatening conditions like heart attack or stroke.

The good news is that high blood pressure, or hypertension, can often be prevented or treated. Early diagnosis and simple, healthy changes can keep high blood pressure from seriously damaging your health.

Normal blood flow delivers nutrients and oxygen to all parts of your body, including important organs like your heart, brain, and kidneys. Your beating

heart helps to push blood through your vast network of blood vessels, both large and small. Your blood vessels, in turn, constantly adjust. They become narrower or wider to maintain your blood pressure and keep blood flowing at a healthy rate.



It's normal for your blood pressure to go up and down throughout each day. Blood pressure is affected by time of day, exercise, the foods you eat, stress, and other factors.

Problems can arise, though, if your blood pressure stays too high for too long.

High blood pressure can make your heart work too hard and lose strength. The high force of blood flow can

damage your blood vessels, making them weak, stiff, or narrower. Over time, hypertension can harm several important organs, including your heart, kidneys, brain, and eyes.

Excess weight or having a family history of high blood pressure also raises your risk for hypertension. African Americans are especially likely to get hypertension. Compared to Caucasian or Hispanic American adults, African Americans tend to develop hypertension at a younger age and to have a higher blood pressure on average.

DETECTING HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

Because it usually has no symptoms, the only way to know for sure that you have hypertension is to have a blood pressure



test. This easy, painless test involves placing an inflated cuff with a pressure gauge around your upper arm to squeeze the blood vessels. A health care provider may then use a stethoscope to listen to your pulse as air is released from the cuff, or an automatic device may measure the pressure.

Blood pressure is given as 2 numbers. The first number represents the pressure in your blood vessels as the heart beats (called systolic pressure). The second is the pressure as your heart relaxes and fills with blood (diastolic pressure). Experts generally agree that the safest blood pressure—or “normal” blood pressure—is 120/80 or lower, meaning systolic blood pressure is 120 or less and diastolic pressure is 80 or less.

“Hypertension is defined as having an average blood pressure of above 140/90,” says NIH’s Dr. Lawrence Fine, who oversees research on the treatment and prevention of hypertension. Since blood pressure can vary widely from day to day, a diagnosis of hypertension is usually based on an average of 2 or more readings taken on 2 or more occasions.

If your blood pressure falls between “normal” and “hypertension,” it’s sometimes called prehypertension. People with prehypertension are more likely to end up with high blood pressure if they don’t take steps to prevent it.

If you’re diagnosed with high blood pressure, your doctor will prescribe a treatment plan. You’ll likely be advised to make healthy lifestyle changes. You may also need to take medications. The goal of treatment is to reduce your blood pressure enough to avoid more serious problems.

How low should you aim when reducing your blood pressure? The answer depends on many factors, which is why it’s important to work with your doctor on blood pressure goals. Most current guidelines recommend aiming for a systolic pressure below 140. These medical guidelines are sometimes adjusted as new research is reported.

FOR HEALTHY BLOOD PRESSURE

- » **Keep a healthy weight.** Ask your doctor if you need to lose weight.
- » **Be physically active.** Get moving for at least 30 minutes most days of the week.
- » **Eat a healthy diet.** Choose an eating plan rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and low-fat dairy and low in saturated fat and added sugars.
- » **Cut down on salt.** Many Americans eat more sodium (found in salt) than they need. Most of the salt comes from processed food (such as soup and baked goods).
- » **Drink alcohol in moderation, if at all.** Men should have no more than 2 drinks a day; women no more than 1 drink a day.
- » **Don’t smoke.** Smoking raises your risk for heart disease, stroke, and other health problems.
- » **Get a good night’s sleep.** Tell your doctor if you’ve been told you snore or sound like you stop breathing briefly when you sleep—a possible sign of sleep apnea. Treating sleep apnea and getting a good night’s sleep can help reduce blood pressure.
- » **Take prescribed drugs as directed.** If you need drugs to help lower your blood pressure, you still should follow the lifestyle changes described above.

