

What Is High Blood Pressure?



Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the walls of the arteries that carry blood from your heart to other parts of your body. Blood pressure normally rises and falls throughout the day, but it can damage your heart and cause health problems if it stays high for a long time. High blood pressure is also called hypertension.

Risk Factors for High Blood Pressure

There are risk factors that increase your chances of developing high blood pressure. Some factors you can control, others you cannot.

Those that can be controlled include:

- Prehypertension, or a blood pressure that is slightly higher than normal
- Diabetes
- Being overweight
- High cholesterol
- Unhealthy diet (high in salt, low in fruits and vegetables, and drinking too much alcohol)
- Physical inactivity

Factors that are difficult to control include:

- Family history of high blood pressure
- Race/ethnicity
- Increasing age
- Gender (males)

- Chronic kidney disease
- Obstructive sleep apnea
- Overactive thyroid
- Pregnancy

Some prescription and over-the-counter medications, as well as supplements can raise your blood pressure.

Medications and supplements that may affect blood pressure:

- Pain medications such as anti-inflammatory drugs including Aleve, ibuprofen, Advil, Motrin IB, and others
- Antidepressants
- Hormonal birth control
- Caffeine
- Cold medications (decongestants)
- Stimulants

If you're using any medications or substances, talk to your doctor about how they can affect your blood pressure.

Signs and Symptoms of High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure usually has no warning signs or symptoms, so many people don't realize they have it. There's only one way to know whether you have high blood pressure: Have a doctor or other health professional measure it. Measuring your blood pressure is quick and painless.



What Blood Pressure Numbers Mean

Blood pressure is measured using two numbers. The first number, called systolic blood pressure, represents the pressure in your blood vessels when your heart beats. The second number, called diastolic blood pressure, represents the pressure in your blood vessels when your heart rests between beats. Blood pressure is measured in millimeters of mercury (mmHg):

- A blood pressure less than 120/80 mmHg is normal.
- A blood pressure of 140/90 mmHg or more is too high.
- People with levels from 120/80 mmHg to 139/89 mmHg have elevated blood pressure and treatment goals should be individualized.
- Patients at high risk for cardiovascular disease or known history of cardiovascular disease typically have a blood pressure goal of less than 130/80.

Controlling High Blood Pressure

Keeping your blood pressure levels in a healthy range usually involves healthy lifestyle habits.

- Take medications the way your doctor tells you
- Don't smoke and avoid secondhand smoke
- Reach and maintain a healthy weight
- Eat a heart-healthy diet that is low in salt (sodium) and rich in fruits and vegetables
- Be more physically active
- Know your blood pressure goal and work to keep it below that level



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