

Blood Pressure

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the pressure of blood pushing against the walls of your arteries. Arteries carry blood from your heart to other parts of your body. Your blood pressure normally rises and falls throughout the day.

What do the blood pressure numbers mean?

Blood pressure is measured using two numbers:

1. The first number, called *systolic* blood pressure, measures the pressure in your arteries when your heart beats.
2. The second number, called *diastolic* blood pressure, measures the pressure in your arteries when your heart rests between beats.

If the measurement reads 120 systolic and 80 diastolic, for example, you say, “120 over 80,” or write, “120/80 mmHg.” “mmHg” stands for “millimeters mercury”, a standard unit for measuring pressure.

What is high blood pressure?

High blood pressure, also called “hypertension”, is blood pressure that is higher than normal. Your blood pressure changes throughout the day based on your activities. Having blood pressure measures consistently above normal may result in a diagnosis of high blood pressure (or hypertension). The higher your blood pressure levels, the more risk you have for other health problems, such as heart disease, heart attack, and stroke. It can also hurt important organs like your kidneys, heart, brain, and eyes. Often, hypertension has no symptoms but can still put the person at risk for these complications.

What causes high blood pressure?

Hypertension usually develops over time and can happen because of an unhealthy lifestyle:

- Smoking
- Not getting enough exercise
- Stress
- Obesity
- High-salt diet
- Drinking too much alcohol

Hypertension can also run in families, causing someone to have an increased risk of high blood pressure without the added lifestyle factors.

The good news...

Usually hypertension can be managed, which will decrease the risk of other serious health problems.

African-Americans in the US have a higher prevalence of hypertension than other racial and ethnic groups, so people of that descent should be sure to talk with their doctor about a plan to stay healthy.

People with other health issues such as diabetes, sleep apnea, or kidney problems may also be at higher risk of developing high blood pressure.

What can I do to prevent or manage high blood pressure?

Changing your lifestyle is an important step in lowering your blood pressure; this might mean:

- Quitting smoking
- Lowering your alcohol and salt intake
- Increasing your exercise
- Losing weight

Talk to your doctor about what might be best for you before you start any new health program. It may even be as simple as finding healthy ways to manage your everyday stress.

The doctor may also prescribe medications to help lower your blood pressure. You may want to try monitoring your blood pressure at home and keeping a log to show your doctor at your next visit.

Blood Pressure Categories



BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORY	SYSTOLIC mm Hg (upper number)		DIASTOLIC mm Hg (lower number)
NORMAL	LESS THAN 120	and	LESS THAN 80
ELEVATED	120 – 129	and	LESS THAN 80
HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE (HYPERTENSION) STAGE 1	130 – 139	or	80 – 89
HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE (HYPERTENSION) STAGE 2	140 OR HIGHER	or	90 OR HIGHER
HYPERTENSIVE CRISIS (consult your doctor immediately)	HIGHER THAN 180	and/or	HIGHER THAN 120

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What is a hypertensive crisis?

A hypertensive crisis is a severe increase in blood pressure that can lead to a stroke or cause the heart to not be able to pump blood effectively. This can be life-threatening. Symptoms of a hypertensive crisis include:

- Severe chest pain
- Seizure
- Nausea and vomiting
- Severe headache (blurred vision/confusion)
- Severe anxiety
- Shortness of breath

If you experience a severe increase in your blood pressure, seek immediate medical attention or call 911.

Treatment for hypertensive crisis may include hospitalization for treatment with oral or IV medications.