

► HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE ◀

What is high blood pressure?

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is the most prevalent cardiovascular condition. Sixty million men and women have blood pressure that's too high, and up to one third of them are unaware of it. Doctors call hypertension the silent killer because it usually causes no physical symptoms and people feel perfectly fine, even when their blood pressure is elevated. But damage to their body is occurring nonetheless.

If there are no symptoms, how can I tell if I have high blood pressure?

You can't, only your doctor can. Checking your blood pressure regularly, at least once a year, is the only way to determine if you have this condition. Even if you have a healthy blood pressure reading now, you can't necessarily count on it staying low forever.

What's normal blood pressure?

For adults, a blood pressure reading less than 130/80, read as 130 over 80, is considered normal blood pressure. Mild hypertension is defined as pressure between 140/90 and 159/99. People with moderate hypertension have a reading of 160/100 to 179/109. Severe hypertension is a blood pressure reading of 180/110 or higher.

A new category of pre-hypertension has been recognized with blood pressure between 130/80 and 140/90. These patients need to be followed closely. Therapeutic lifestyle changes (diet, exercise) are recommended prior to antihypertensive medication.

What do the numbers mean?

The first and upper number (systolic pressure) represents the pressure in your arteries as the heart contracts to pump blood through the circulatory system. The second and lower number (diastolic pressure) is the pressure in your arteries between beats, when the heart is resting. Either the systolic or diastolic measurement, or both, can be elevated when your blood pressure is too high. High readings mean your heart is working unnaturally hard to circulate blood.

A word of caution, though: If your doctor tells you your blood pressure is a little high, don't panic and assume this automatically lumps you into the category of hypertensive. It's best that your doctor do several blood pressure checks over a few months and in a variety of circumstances to get a true reading. You and your doctor should begin treatment when measurements indicate that your blood pressure is consistently elevated.

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How serious is high blood pressure?

High blood pressure shouldn't be taken lightly. It's a risk factor for deadly conditions such as coronary heart disease, heart attack, stroke and kidney disease. High blood pressure contributes to atherosclerosis, the build-up of sticky plaque on the artery walls, making it difficult for blood to flow freely. When arteries in the brain or heart become clogged, you can suffer a stroke or heart attack. Impaired vision occurs when tiny blood vessels in the back of the eye rupture or become blocked. Kidney impairment results when vessels in the kidneys are narrowed.

What causes high blood pressure?

It's rare to pinpoint a specific cause of high blood pressure. Doctors do know that hypertension runs in families, and that lack of exercise, stress, being overweight, smoking and drinking heavily contribute to and even worsen hypertension. African Americans have a higher rate of hypertension and tend to have more severe hypertension than whites, but it's not yet known why this occurs. It's suspected that genes and diet play some role, though.

Does sodium cause high blood pressure?

Although salt restriction may reduce the blood pressure of some hypertensive people, normal amounts of sodium usually do not cause hypertension. But excess sodium can lead to fluid retention. More fluid in the body raises the total volume of blood flowing through your system; the higher the volume, the higher your blood pressure.

Cardiologists typically recommend low-sodium diets for those with hypertension or with a family history of the disease because in many people, blood pressure falls significantly if salt intake is restricted. These people are "salt sensitive," meaning their blood pressure rises when they ingest large amounts of sodium, and drops when they reduce sodium intake.

How is high blood pressure treated?

In general, the best approach to prevent and control high blood pressure is one that involves small, easy lifestyle fixes. Exercising regularly, giving up cigarettes, reducing stress and limiting sodium and alcohol intake can bring blood pressure down to safer levels. In fact, for many people with hypertension, losing 10 or 20 pounds can lower their pressure to a more normal range. Making physical activity a regular part of your everyday life, along with a reduced-fat diet, can help you shed excess pounds. Preliminary studies suggest that a diet rich in potassium and calcium may help reduce blood pressure. Eating a balanced diet that includes low-fat dairy products and more fruit and vegetables will automatically boost your intake of these nutrients.

These lifestyle improvements are the first step to controlling high blood pressure, no matter your age or risk status. The exception is if your blood pressure is so alarmingly high that immediate antihypertensive medication is needed.

What medications are used to treat high blood pressure?

Adopting a healthier lifestyle is often the only measure many people with high blood pressure need to take to bring their reading down. Others, however, need to combine medication with a healthy lifestyle to make their pressure respond in a more favorable way. Diuretics rid the body of excess salt and water. This reduces the volume, and therefore the pressure, of your blood. Beta blockers keep your heart from pumping too hard and too fast, thus reducing blood pressure. Calcium blockers, alpha blockers, ACE (angiotensin-converting-enzyme) inhibitors and angiotensin receptor blockers (ARB's) all keep blood vessels open, lowering resistance and, therefore blood pressure. Calcium channel blockers relax the muscles

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in the blood vessel walls, alpha blockers interfere with impulses from the brain and nerves that constrict vessels, and ACE inhibitors and ARB's block the action of an enzyme that causes arteries to narrow.

Are there any drawbacks to medications?

When trying to bring blood pressure down to normal levels with medication, some people complain of fatigue, depression and a general sense of "not feeling right." Since high blood pressure rarely has symptoms, the treatment sometimes seems worse than the disease, and some patients stop taking medication, which isn't a wise idea. Hypertension is a lifelong disease that requires lifelong treatment.

Yet, there's no reason to tolerate unpleasant side effects if you're on medication. There are many factors that figure into the choice of antihypertensive medication. With advances in drug therapy, sometimes all that's needed to get rid of undesirable complications is a minor reworking of the type of medication, the dosage, how frequently you take it or how it's delivered to your body.

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