

# B OF WELLNESS KNOW YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE



## WHAT IS HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

High blood pressure (HBP) is a serious condition that can lead to coronary heart disease, heart failure, stroke, kidney failure, and other health problems. About one in three adults in the United States has HBP. Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the walls of the arteries as the heart pumps out blood. If this pressure rises and stays high over time, it can damage the body in many ways. HBP itself usually has no symptoms. You can have it for years without knowing it. During this time, however, it can damage the heart, blood vessels, kidneys, and other parts of your body.

Because of the damage that can be caused by high blood pressure, it is important to know your blood pressure numbers, even when you're feeling fine. If your blood pressure is normal, you can work with your healthcare team to keep it that way. If your blood pressure is too high, you need treatment to prevent damage to your body's organs.

## KNOW YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE NUMBERS

Blood pressure numbers include systolic (sis-TOL-ik) and diastolic (di-a-STOL-ik) pressures. Systolic blood pressure is the pressure when the heart beats while pumping blood. Diastolic blood pressure is the pressure when the heart is at rest between beats. You will most often see blood pressure numbers written with the systolic number above or before the diastolic number, such as "120/80 mmHg" (mmHg is millimeters of mercury — the units used to measure blood pressure).

Table 1 shows normal blood pressure numbers for adults. It also shows which numbers put you at greater risk for health

Category	Systolic (top number; mmHg)	And	Diastolic (bottom number; mmHg)
Normal	Less than 120	And	Less than 80
Pre-high blood pressure	120–139	Or	80–89
<b>High blood pressure</b>			
Stage 1	140–159	Or	90–99
Stage 2	160 or higher	Or	100 or higher

problems. The ranges in the table apply to most adults (people age 18 years and older) who don't have short-term serious illnesses. Blood pressure tends to go up and down, even in people who have normal blood pressure. If your numbers stay above normal most of the time, you're at risk.

All levels above 120/80 mmHg raise your risk, and the risk grows as blood pressure levels rise. "Pre-high blood pressure" means you're likely to end up with HBP unless you take steps to prevent it.

## WHAT CAUSES HBP?

Blood pressure tends to rise with age unless you take steps to prevent or control it. Certain medical problems, such as chronic kidney disease, thyroid disease, and sleep apnea, may cause blood pressure to rise. Certain medicines, such as asthma medicines (e.g., corticosteroids) and cold-relief products, also may raise blood pressure. In some women, blood pressure can go up if they use birth control pills, become pregnant, or take hormone replacement therapy.

## WHO IS AT RISK FOR HBP?

In the United States, about 72 million people have HBP. Certain traits, conditions, or habits are known to raise the risk for HBP. These conditions are called risk factors. Major risk factors for HBP that you *cannot* do anything about include the following:

### ★ OLDER AGE

Blood pressure tends to rise with age. If you're a male older than 45 or a female older than 55, your risk for HBP increases. More than half of all Americans aged 60 and older have HBP.

### ★ RACE/ETHNICITY

HBP can affect anyone; however, it occurs more often in African American adults than in Caucasian or Hispanic American adults. Additionally, HBP risks vary among different groups of Hispanic American adults. For instance, Puerto Rican American adults have higher rates of HBP-related death than all other Hispanic groups and Caucasians. However, Cuban Americans have lower rates than Caucasians.

### ★ GENDER


Fewer adult women than men have HBP. Women age 60 and older are as likely as men to be aware of and be treated for HBP.


### ★ FAMILY HISTORY

A family history of HBP raises your risk for the condition. Therefore, it is important to ask your relatives if they or someone else in your family has had the condition.


Major risk factors for HBP that you can do something about include the following:


 Eat less sodium (salt).

 Drink less beer, wine, or hard liquor.

 Eat foods rich in potassium such as bananas, spinach, chicken, and nuts.

 Exercise.

 Stop smoking.

 Maintain a healthy weight.

### HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU HAVE HBP?

HBP usually has no symptoms. Rarely, headaches may occur. You can have the condition for years without knowing it. During this time, it can damage the heart, blood vessels, kidneys, and other parts of the body.

Knowing your blood pressure numbers is important, even when you're feeling fine. If your blood pressure is normal, you can work with your healthcare team to keep it that way. If your numbers are too high, you can take steps to lower them and control your blood pressure. This helps reduce your risk for complications.

### HOW IS HBP DIAGNOSED?

Your doctor will diagnose HBP using the results of blood pressure tests. A blood pressure test is easy and painless. This test is done at a doctor's office or clinic. The test will be done several times to make sure the results are correct. If your numbers are high, your doctor may have you return for more tests to check your blood pressure over time.

### WHAT CAN I DO IF I HAVE HBP?

High blood pressure HBP is treated with lifestyle changes and medicines. Most people who have the condition will need lifelong treatment. Sticking to your treatment plan is important. It can prevent or delay the problems linked to HBP and help you live and stay active longer.

### LIFESTYLE CHANGES

#### ★ HEALTHY EATING

Eat healthy foods that are fat-free, low-fat milk and dairy

products, fish, poultry, and nuts. Eat less red meat, sweets, added sugars, and sugar-containing beverages. Limit the amount of salt that you eat. Try to eat no more than about 1 teaspoon of salt a day.

#### ★ LIMITING ALCOHOL

You should try to limit alcoholic drinks. Too much alcohol will raise your blood pressure. Men should have no more than two alcoholic drinks a day. Women should have no more than one alcoholic drink a day.

#### ★ REGULAR EXERCISE AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

Regular physical activity can lower high blood pressure and also reduce your risk for other health problems. Check with your doctor about how much and what kinds of activity are safe for you. Staying at a healthy weight can help control blood pressure and also reduce your risk for other health problems.

#### ★ QUIT SMOKING

Smoking can damage your blood vessels and raise your risk for HBP. It also can worsen health problems related to HBP. Smoking is bad for everyone, especially those who have HBP. If you smoke or use tobacco, quit. Talk to your doctor about programs and products that can help you quit. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has information on how to quit smoking ([www.surgeongeneral.gov/tobacco/](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/tobacco/)). In addition, take steps to protect yourself from secondhand smoke.

### MANAGING STRESS

Learning how to manage stress, relax, and cope with problems can improve your emotional and physical health. Physical activity helps some people cope with stress. Other people listen to music or focus on something calm or peaceful to reduce stress. Some people learn yoga, tai chi, or how to meditate.

### MEDICINES

Today's blood pressure medicines can safely help most people control their blood pressure. These medicines are easy to take. The side effects, if any, tend to be minor. If you have side effects from your medicines, talk to your doctor. He or she may be able to adjust the doses or prescribe other medicines. You shouldn't decide on your own to stop taking your medicines.

Blood pressure medicines work in different ways to lower blood pressure. Some remove extra fluid and salt from the body to lower blood pressure. Others slow down the heartbeat or relax and widen blood vessels. Often, two or more medicines work better than one.

---

**SOURCE** National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, US Department of Health and Human Services.