



What Is High Blood Pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the artery walls. It's measured in millimeters of mercury (mm Hg).

High blood pressure means the pressure in your arteries is too high.

Blood pressure is written as two numbers, such as 112/78 mm Hg. The upper number, called systolic pressure, is the pressure when the heart beats. The lower number, called diastolic pressure, is the pressure when the heart rests between beats.

Normal blood pressure is below 120/80 mm Hg. If you're an adult and your systolic pressure is 120 to 129, and your diastolic pressure is less than 80, you have **elevated blood pressure**. **High blood pressure** is a systolic pressure of 130 or higher, or a diastolic pressure of 80 or higher, that stays high over time.

High blood pressure usually has no signs or symptoms. That's why it is so dangerous. But it can be managed.

Nearly half of the American population over age 20 has high blood pressure (high BP), and many don't even know it. Not treating high blood pressure is dangerous. It increases the risk of heart attack and stroke.

Make sure you get your blood pressure checked regularly and treat it the way your health care professional advises.

| BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORY | SYSTOLIC mm Hg (top/upper number) | | DIASTOLIC mm Hg (bottom/lower number) |
|--|--------------------------------------|--------|--|
| NORMAL | LESS THAN 120 | and | LESS THAN 80 |
| ELEVATED | 120–129 | and | LESS THAN 80 |
| STAGE 1 HYPERTENSION (High Blood Pressure) | 130–139 | or | 80–89 |
| STAGE 2 HYPERTENSION (High Blood Pressure) | 140 OR HIGHER | or | 90 OR HIGHER |
| SEVERE HYPERTENSION (If you don't have symptoms*, call your health care professional.) | HIGHER THAN 180 | and/or | HIGHER THAN 120 |
| HYPERTENSIVE EMERGENCY (If you have any of these symptoms*, call 911.) | HIGHER THAN 180 | and/or | HIGHER THAN 120 |

*symptoms: chest pain, shortness of breath, back pain, numbness, weakness, change in vision or difficulty speaking

Am I at higher risk of developing High BP?

There are risk factors that increase your chances of developing high BP. Some you can control, and some you can't.

Those that can be controlled are:

- Cigarette smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke
- Diabetes
- Being obese or overweight
- High cholesterol
- Unhealthy diet (high in sodium, low in potassium, and drinking too much alcohol)
- Physical inactivity

Factors that cannot be modified or are difficult to control are:

- Family history of high blood pressure
- Race/ethnicity
- Age
- Gender
- Chronic kidney disease
- Obstructive sleep apnea

Socioeconomic status and psychosocial stress are also risk factors for high BP. These can affect access to basic living needs, like healthy food, medications, and health care professionals, and may limit the ability to make healthy lifestyle changes.

(continued)



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How can I tell I have it?

The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to get it checked regularly.

For proper diagnosis of high BP, your health care professional will use an average based on two or more readings taken on two or more visits.



What can I do about High BP?

- Don't smoke and avoid secondhand smoke.
- Reach and maintain a healthy weight.
- Eat a healthy diet that is low in saturated and trans fats and rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products.
- Try to consume less than 1,500 mg/day of sodium (salt).
- Eat foods rich in potassium such as bananas, avocados, cantaloupe, potatoes and sweet potatoes. Aim for 3,500 – 5,000 mg of dietary potassium per day. If you have kidney disease or are taking certain medications, talk to your health care professional before increasing potassium.
- Avoid or limit alcohol to no more than one drink per day if you're a woman or two drinks a day if you're a man.
- Be more physically active. Get 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week, or a combination of both, spread throughout the week. Add muscle-strengthening activity at least two days per week for more health benefits.
- Take medication the way your health care professional tells you.
- Know what your blood pressure should be and work to keep it at that level.

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721) or visit heart.org to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up for our monthly *Heart Insight* e-news for heart patients and their families at HeartInsight.org.
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at heart.org/SupportNetwork.

Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write down questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:

Will I always have to take medication?

What should my blood pressure be?

MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to lower your risk for heart disease, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit heart.org/AnswersByHeart to learn more.