

# What About African Americans and High Blood Pressure?

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The prevalence of high blood pressure in African Americans is among the highest in the world. High blood pressure, also called hypertension, affects more than 40 percent of African Americans. It also develops earlier in life in

blacks than in whites and is usually more severe. High blood pressure usually has no symptoms. That's why it's called the "silent killer." The only way to know if your blood pressure is high is to have your doctor check it regularly.

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## What's blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the pressure of the blood against the walls of the arteries. Blood pressure results from two forces. One is created by the

heart as it pumps blood into the arteries and through the circulatory system. The other is the force of the arteries as they resist the blood flow.

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## What should my blood pressure be?

Normal blood pressure is below 120/80mm Hg. The top number (systolic) is the pressure when the heart beats. The bottom number (diastolic) is the pressure when the heart rests between beats. If you're an adult with a blood pressure of 120 to 139/80 to 89, you have pre-hypertension.

If your blood pressure is 140/90 mm Hg or higher, you have high blood pressure. If you have high blood pressure and diabetes or kidney disease, your doctor will want your blood pressure to be at least lower than 130/80 mm Hg.

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## What causes high blood pressure?

No one knows for sure. In fact, 90 to 95 percent of high blood pressure cases have no known cause. Factors that may lead to high blood pressure in the remaining 5 to 10 percent of

cases include kidney disease, tumors of the adrenal glands near the kidneys and narrowing of certain arteries.

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## How often should I have my blood pressure checked?

Your doctor may take several readings over time before making a judgment about your blood pressure. A blood pressure test is quick and painless. You can have it done in a doctor's

office, hospital clinic, school nurse's office, company clinic, churches, health fairs, and some grocery and drugstores. Your doctor will tell you how often you should have it checked.

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## How does high blood pressure affect me?

It can damage blood vessels in various parts of your body. And the longer it's left untreated, the more likely organs such as your heart, brain,

kidneys or eyes will be damaged. This can lead to heart attack, stroke, heart failure, kidney disease and blindness.

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## Can high blood pressure be cured?

No. But it can be controlled.

You can't control these risk factors:

- Race — Blacks develop high blood pressure earlier in life and their average blood pressures are higher than the blood pressures of whites.
- Age — In general, the older you get, the greater your chance of developing high blood pressure. Men tend to develop high blood pressure earlier in life than women.
- Heredity — A tendency to have high blood pressure runs in families. But you can control some risk factors:
- Overweight (obesity)
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Lack of physical activity
- Having diabetes
- Stress

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## What can I do about my blood pressure?

You can:

- Lose weight if you're overweight.
- Eat healthy foods low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and salt.
- Eat a diet that emphasizes fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products.
- Increase your daily physical activity.
- Limit alcohol to no more than one drink a day if you're a woman, two drinks a day if you're a man.
- If you smoke, stop.
- Take medicine the way your doctor tells you.

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## How can I learn more?

1. Talk to your doctor, nurse or other health-care professionals. If you have heart disease or have had a stroke, members of your family also may be at higher risk. It's very important for them to make changes now to lower their risk.
2. Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721) or visit [americanheart.org](http://americanheart.org) to learn more about heart disease.
3. For information on stroke, call 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit [StrokeAssociation.org](http://StrokeAssociation.org).

We have many other fact sheets and educational booklets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one.

Knowledge is power, so *Learn and Live!*

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## Do you have questions or comments for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write your own questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider. For example:

How is high blood pressure treated?

What type of diet would be most helpful?