

# What is High Blood Pressure?

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Another name for high blood pressure (HBP) is hypertension (hi-per-TEN-shun).

High blood pressure means the pressure in your arteries is elevated. Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against blood vessel walls. It's written as two numbers, such as 112/78 mm Hg. The top, systolic, number is the pressure when the heart beats. The bottom, diastolic, number 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 139, or your diastolic pressure is 80 to 89 (or both), then you have "prehypertension." High blood pressure is a pressure of 140 systolic or higher and/or 90 diastolic or higher that stays high over time.

No one knows exactly what causes most cases of high blood pressure. It usually can't be cured, but it can be controlled. High blood pressure usually has no symptoms. It is truly a "Silent Killer."

About 72 million Americans and 1 in 3 adults have it, and many don't even know they have it. Not treating high blood pressure is dangerous. High blood pressure increases the risk of heart attack and stroke. You can live a healthier life if you treat and control it!



High blood pressure usually doesn't have any signs — that's why it's so dangerous. Make sure you get it checked regularly and treat it the way your doctor advises.

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## Who is at higher risk?

- People with close blood relatives who have HBP
- African Americans
- People over age 35
- Overweight people
- People who aren't physically active
- People who consume too much salt
- People who drink too much alcohol
- People with diabetes, gout or kidney disease
- Pregnant women
- Women who take birth control pills, who are overweight, had HBP during pregnancy, have a family history of HBP or have mild kidney disease

## How can I tell I have it?

You usually can't tell! Many people have it and don't know it. The only way to know if your blood

pressure is high is to get it checked regularly by your doctor.

## What can untreated high blood pressure lead to?

- Stroke
- Heart attack, angina or both
- Heart failure
- Kidney failure
- Peripheral arterial disease (PAD)

## What can I do about it?

- Lose weight if you're overweight.
- Eat healthy meals low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and salt.
- Limit alcohol to no more than one drink per day for women or two drinks a day for men.
- Be more physically active. Exercise at least 30 minutes on most or all days of the week.
- Take medicine the way your doctor tells you.
- Know what your blood pressure should be and work to keep it at that level.

## How can medicine help?

- Some medicines, such as vasodilators, help relax and open up your blood vessels so blood can flow through better. A diuretic (di-uh-RET-ik) can help keep your body from holding too

much water and salt. Other medicines help your heart beat more slowly and with less force.

## 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!*

## 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 health care provider. For example:

Will I always have to take medicine?

What should my blood pressure be?



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