

Hypertension



What Is Hypertension?

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is a common health problem. Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the walls of your arteries as your heart pumps blood through your body. High blood pressure makes your heart work harder with every heartbeat. If you don't get treated for your hypertension, you have a higher risk for heart attack, heart failure, stroke, or kidney failure.



What Are the Warning Signs of Hypertension?

Hypertension often has no symptoms. You may be able to tell when your blood pressure is high, but the only way to know for sure is to take your blood pressure.

- Most people may not know the cause of their high blood pressure. Family history, diet, weight, and other lifestyle habits can affect your blood pressure.
- Certain medical problems, such as kidney or thyroid disease, may cause blood pressure to rise.
- Also, some medicines, like those for arthritis or colds, can raise blood pressure.
- Some women develop a special type of high blood pressure during pregnancy. This usually goes away after the baby is born, but sometimes it can linger.



How Is Hypertension Diagnosed?

Blood pressure is measured by inflating a cuff around the arm—this is connected to a device that measures pressure. The test is easy and painless.

- Your doctor may want to take several blood pressure readings at different times before diagnosing you with hypertension. This is because blood pressure normally changes during the day.
- The blood pressure reading is given as two numbers (example: 120/80). The top number is called systolic pressure, and it measures the pressure while your heart is beating. The bottom number is called diastolic pressure and measures the pressure while the heart is relaxed between beats. Ask your doctor what blood pressure reading is normal for you.



How Is Hypertension Treated?

There are many different medicines to help treat high blood pressure. Your doctor may prescribe one medicine or a combination of medicines. Many lifestyle changes can also help to lower your blood pressure. Almost everyone with high blood pressure can bring down their numbers with lifestyle changes, medicines, or both. Follow these healthy habits even if you take blood pressure medicine:

- Eat less salt
- Exercise
- Eat more fruits and vegetables
- Lose weight
- Drink less alcohol
- Quit smoking

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Questions for My Doctor

- Do I need to take blood pressure medicines every day or only as needed?
- If I lose weight and exercise, is it possible that my blood pressure will return to normal?
- Does it matter if I take my medicine in the morning or at night?
- How much salt should I eat each day?
- Are there any possible side effects from blood pressure medicines?
- How often should I have my blood pressure checked?
- Are there any activities I need to avoid?



Bottom Line

- Blood pressure is the force pushing against the walls of your arteries as your heart pumps blood throughout your body. Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is when that force is too high.
- If not treated, hypertension can lead to heart attack, heart failure, stroke, and/or kidney disease.
- Most people can't tell if they have high blood pressure, so it's important to have your blood pressure checked by a doctor.
- Your doctor may prescribe one medicine or a combination of medicines to lower your blood pressure.
- Lifestyle changes, like losing weight, eating less salt, and exercising, may also help lower blood pressure.

For More Information

- **ACP:** www.acponline.org/patients_families/products/brochures/hypertension.pdf
- **American Heart Association:** www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=2114
- **National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute:** www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/hbp_low/hbp_low.pdf
- **National Kidney Foundation:** www.kidney.org/atoz/atozTopic_HighBloodPressure.cfm

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