



# What Is High Blood Pressure?

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

High blood pressure (HBP) means the pressure in your arteries is higher than it should be. Another name for high blood pressure is hypertension.

Blood pressure is 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 129, and your diastolic pressure is less than 80, you have elevated blood pressure. High blood pressure is a pressure of 130 systolic or higher, or 80 diastolic 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 HBP, and many don't even know it. Not treating high blood pressure is dangerous. HBP increases the risk of heart attack and stroke.

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

BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORY	SYSTOLIC mm Hg (upper number)		DIASTOLIC mm Hg (lower number)
NORMAL	LESS THAN 120	and	LESS THAN 80
ELEVATED	120 – 129	and	LESS THAN 80
HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE (HYPERTENSION) STAGE 1	130 – 139	or	80 – 89
HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE (HYPERTENSION) STAGE 2	140 OR HIGHER	or	90 OR HIGHER
HYPERTENSIVE CRISIS (consult your doctor immediately)	HIGHER THAN 180	and /or	HIGHER THAN 120

## Am I at higher risk of developing HBP?

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

Those that can be controlled are:

- 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

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

- Family history of high blood pressure
- Race/ethnicity
- Increasing age
- Gender (males)
- Chronic kidney disease
- Obstructive sleep apnea

Socioeconomic status and psychosocial stress are also risk factors for HBP. These can affect access to basic living necessities, medication, healthcare providers, and the ability to adopt lifestyle changes.

### How can I tell I have it?

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

For proper diagnosis of high blood pressure, your healthcare provider will use an average based on two or more readings obtained on two or more occasions.

### What can I do about HBP?

- 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.
- Aim to consume less than 1,500 mg/day of sodium (salt). Even reducing your daily intake by 1000 mg can help.
- Eat foods rich in potassium. Aim for 3,500 – 5,000 mg of dietary potassium per day.
- 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. Aim for at least 90 to 150 minutes of aerobic and/or dynamic resistance exercise per week, and/or three sessions of isometric resistance exercises per 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 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 to get *Heart Insight*, a free magazine 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 the doctor or nurse?

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

For example:

**Will I always have to take medicine?**

**What should my blood pressure be?**

### My Questions:

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



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