Preventing and Controlling High Blood Pressure (Hypertension)

What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the walls of your arteries. It will go up when your heart beats and drop when your heart relaxes between beats. It changes with your emotions and with activity. It will even change when you stand up after sitting or lying down.

These changes are normal. But when blood pressure is too high for too long, it can lead to serious health problems.

Anyone can have high blood pressure (hypertension). You are more likely to have it if you are inactive, overweight or a smoker. Your risk also increases with age and certain medicines.

What can I do to prevent or control high blood pressure?

Get regular exercise.

- Do moderate activity at least 30 minutes on most days of the week.
- Do aerobic exercise for 20 to 60 minutes at least four days a week. (Check with your doctor first to make sure this is safe for you.) Aerobic activity includes any exercise that makes your heart beat harder, such as walking, running, dancing or tennis.

Eat a healthy, low-salt diet.

Eat less than 2000 mg of sodium (salt) each day. (one teaspoon salt equals 2300 mg sodium.) Don't add salt to foods. Read food labels to see how much sodium is in your food.
Eat at least two cups of fruit each day.
Eat at least two and half cups of vegetables each day.

Quit smoking. Smoking can increase your blood pressure for up to 15 minutes after each cigarette.

Control your weight. For some people, losing just 10 pounds helps control high blood pressure.

Manage stress. Stress causes your blood pressure to go up.

Take your medicines. If your doctor gives you medicine to lower your blood pressure, take it at the same time each day. Never stop or change medicines without first talking to your doctor.

See your doctor regularly. A nurse will check your blood pressure at each visit.

For most people, these habits will keep blood pressure in the safe range. If you follow these steps but still find it hard to control your blood pressure, talk to your doctor.

For informational purposes only. Not to replace the advice of your health care provider. Clinically reviewed by Chris Martin, R.Ph.
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What will happen if I don't control my blood pressure?

High blood pressure is sometimes called "the silent killer," because there are rarely any symptoms.

If you don't control your blood pressure, your heart will pump harder than it should. Over time, this can damage blood vessels and enlarge the heart, putting even more strain on the heart and arteries. This increases your risk for heart attack, heart failure, stroke, diabetes, kidney disease and other serious health problems.

If you take steps to control your blood pressure, you will greatly reduce your risks for health problems.

Should I check my blood pressure at home?

Your doctor may ask you to check your blood pressure daily. He or she will tell you what kind of monitor to use and show you how to use it.

Tips for checking your blood pressure:

- Check it at the same time each day.
- Do not eat, exercise, take medicine, smoke or drink alcohol for 30 minutes before checking your blood pressure.
- Find a quiet place where you can sit and relax. Remove any tight clothing or jewelry that may get in the way of the cuff.
- Rest your elbow on a table so your cuff is at heart level. Hold still and don't talk while checking your blood pressure.
- Write your results in a logbook. Bring this book to each doctor or clinic visit. Your care team will explain your results.
- Bring your monitor to your doctor's office at least once to have it checked for accuracy.

What do the numbers mean?

The reading is made up of two numbers, written as a fraction: for example, 130/80, which is read as "130 over 80."

The top number shows systolic pressure (pressure when your heart beats). The bottom shows diastolic pressure (pressure when your heart rests).

If either number is high while you are at rest, you may have high blood pressure. The higher the numbers, the more serious your high blood pressure.

The "safe" range for blood pressure varies for each person. The chart below shows averages ranges. Ask your doctor what range is safe for you.

Blood pressure	***Systolic pressure*** (when the heart beats)	***Diastolic pressure*** (when the heart is at rest)
Normal	less than 120	less than 80
At-risk	120 to 139	80 to 89
High	140 or higher	90 or higher
Your goal		

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