

Health tip: Understanding blood pressure

High blood pressure—or hypertension—usually has no symptoms. But it may cause serious problems, such as stroke, heart disease, heart attack and kidney failure. That’s why having your blood pressure checked regularly is important—even when you’re feeling fine.

Blood pressure measures the force of the blood against the walls of your arteries as your heart beats and rests.

Having high blood pressure puts you at risk for heart disease and stroke, which are leading causes of death in the United States.^{1,2}

What do the numbers mean?

Systolic pressure (the top number) measures the pressure in the arterial walls when the heart contracts.

Diastolic pressure (the bottom number) measures the pressure in the arterial walls when the heart rests between beats.

Hypertension is the medical term for high blood pressure. High blood pressure may not cause any symptoms. In fact, many people with high blood pressure do not even know they have it.

Check the chart. Which describes your blood pressure? Take action and discuss with your primary care physician to decrease your risk.

Initial care/hospital care	Systolic mm Hg (upper #)		Diastolic mm Hg (lower #)
Normal	Less than 120	and	Less than 80
Elevated	Between 120 and 129	and	Less than 80
High Blood Pressure Stage 1 Hypertension	Between 130 and 139	or	Between 80 and 89
High Blood Pressure Stage 2 Hypertension	140 or higher	or	90 or higher
Hypertensive Crisis (Emergency care needed)	Higher than 180	and/or	Higher than 120

Many factors may put a person at higher risk for developing high blood pressure. Some factors we cannot control like our genetics or age, but some are in our control. Consider this list of risk factors related to lifestyle.³

Physical inactivity

An inactive lifestyle increases your risk of having high blood pressure. Physical activity is great for your heart and circulatory system.

An unhealthy diet, especially one high in salt

Good nutrition from a variety of sources is critical for your health. A diet that is too high in salt, calories, saturated fat and sugar, carries an additional risk of high blood pressure.

Being overweight

Carrying too much weight puts an extra strain on your heart and circulatory system that may cause serious health problems. It also increases your risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

Tobacco use

Using tobacco may cause your blood pressure to temporarily increase and may contribute to damaged arteries. Exposure to secondhand smoke also increases the risk of heart disease for nonsmokers.

Drinking too much alcohol

Regular, heavy use of alcohol may cause many health problems, including heart failure, stroke and an irregular heartbeat. It may cause your blood pressure to increase dramatically and may also increase your risk of cancer, obesity, alcoholism, suicide and accidents.

Adopting a healthier lifestyle may improve your blood pressure and is considered the first line in treating and preventing high blood pressure.

Consider these strategies for reducing your risk of developing high blood pressure

- Don't use tobacco
- Get plenty of exercise
- Reduce your use of alcohol if you do drink
- Eat a healthy diet rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables
- Strive for a healthier body weight
- Find ways to cope effectively with stress (exercise is a great remedy)
- When lifestyle changes are not enough, your health provider may prescribe medications to help lower your blood pressure

Key things to remember when looking at your blood pressure history

- Those living with diabetes or chronic kidney disease should keep blood pressure below 130/80 mmHg
- Prehypertension should be taken seriously because over time it may lead to stroke, heart attack, heart failure, kidney disease, vision loss or sexual dysfunction
- One high reading does not mean that you have high blood pressure. To diagnose hypertension, work with your health care provider to learn your personal target blood pressure.

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¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, High Blood Pressure Symptoms and Causes. <https://www.cdc.gov/bloodpressure/about.htm>. May 2021. Accessed August 2023.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Leading Causes of Death. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/leading-causes-of-death.htm>. January 2023. Accessed August 2023.

³ American Heart Association, Changes You Can Make to Manage High Blood Pressure. <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/high-blood-pressure/changes-you-can-make-to-manage-high-blood-pressure>. June 2023. Accessed August 2023.

This information is for general informational purposes only and is not intended nor should be construed as medical advice. Individuals should consult an appropriate medical professional to determine what may be right for them.