

Blood pressure

Blood pressure is the pressure of the blood in the arteries as it is pumped around the body by the heart. Blood pressure does not stay the same all the time. It changes to meet your body's needs. It is affected by various factors including body position, breathing or emotional state, exercise and sleep.

If blood pressure remains high, it can lead to serious problems like heart attack, stroke, heart failure or kidney disease. The medical name for persistently high blood pressure is 'hypertension'.

Measuring blood pressure

Blood pressure is usually measured by wrapping an inflatable pressure cuff around the upper arm. This cuff is part of a machine called a sphygmomanometer. It is best to measure blood pressure when you are relaxed and sitting or lying down.

Blood pressure is recorded as two numbers, such as 120/80. The larger number indicates the pressure in the arteries as the heart squeezes out blood during each beat. This is called the **systolic blood pressure**. The lower number indicates the pressure as the heart relaxes before the next beat. This is called the **diastolic blood pressure**.

Blood pressure varies

Blood pressure changes to meet your body's needs. If a reading is high, your doctor may measure your blood pressure again on several separate occasions to confirm the level. Your doctor may also recommend that you measure your blood pressure at home or have a 24-hour recording with a monitor device.

High blood pressure

There is no 'ideal' blood pressure reading. The following classification for clinic blood pressures in adults can be used as a guide:

- Normal blood pressure – generally less than 120/80
- High-normal (the higher range of normal) – between 120/80 and 139/89
- Mild high blood pressure – between 140/90 and 159/99
- Moderate high blood pressure – between 160/100 and 179/109
- Severe high blood pressure – equal to or more than 180/110.

High blood pressure usually does not give warning signs. You can have high blood pressure and feel perfectly well. The only way to find out if your blood pressure is high is to have it checked regularly by your doctor.

Have your blood pressure checked regularly

If your blood pressure is 'normal' and you have no other risk factors for cardiovascular disease, and no personal or family history of high blood pressure, a check every two years and during routine visits to your doctor is recommended.

If your blood pressure is 'high-normal' (or higher), or if you have other risk factors for cardiovascular disease, a personal or family history of high blood pressure, stroke or heart attack, it is best to have it checked more frequently. Ask your doctor for advice.

Controlling high blood pressure

If blood pressure remains high, it can lead to serious health problems. You will be more at risk of these problems if you smoke, are overweight, are physically inactive, have diabetes, have high blood cholesterol, are socially isolated or have depression.

Lifestyle changes are very important to help to control high blood pressure and lower your risk of cardiovascular disease. Suggestions include:

- Reduce your excess body weight
- Be physically active
- Limit your alcohol intake
- Quit smoking
- Decrease your salt/sodium intake
- Increase your potassium intake through eating a wide variety of fruit, vegetables, plain unsalted nuts and legumes.

Some people may also need medicine to control high blood pressure, but it is still important for them to make lifestyle changes too.

Be active every day

Try to do at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week. This can be done in bouts of 10 minutes or longer, if this is more convenient.

Physical activity is any form of bodily movement performed by our large muscle groups. Moderate-intensity physical activity (energetic activities that don't make you breathless), such as brisk walking and cycling, is enough to give you health benefits.

Some types of exercises, such as lifting heavy weights and body presses, can actually raise your blood pressure. These should be avoided if you have high blood pressure. Check with your doctor before starting a new activity or increasing your level or intensity. Be active safely. Build up your levels of activity gradually.

Enjoy healthy eating

Healthy eating is important in controlling high blood pressure and reducing your risk of heart disease. Enjoying a variety of foods from the different food groups is the key to healthy eating. Try to include every day:

- Vegetables
- Wholegrains
- Lean meats
- Oily fish
- Fruit
- Reduced, low or no fat dairy
- Monounsaturated or polyunsaturated vegetable and seed oils
- Nuts, seeds and legumes.

Reduce your salt intake

Reducing salt intake can also help to control high blood pressure or avoid high blood pressure altogether. To help reduce your salt intake:

- Choose low or reduced salt food where available
- Avoid adding salt to cooking or at the table – flavour meals with herbs and spices instead
- Avoid high salt foods, such as potato crisps/chips, salted nuts, commercial sauces (such as tomato, soy and fish), processed meat and most take-away foods.

Take medicines if required

There is a large variety of medicines available to lower and control high blood pressure. Your doctor might call them 'antihypertensives'.

These medicines do not cure high blood pressure, but they do control it. Once you start to take medicines to control your blood pressure, you will probably need to take them for the rest of your life. However, the dose of these medicines may change over time.

If you need to take medicine, your doctor will advise you on the correct type of medicine and the dose. Two or more different medicines are often needed to get good control of blood pressure.

You need to make sure that you take your medicines regularly. Some things that may help you remember to take your medicines include:

- Taking them at the same time each day.
- Using a weekly pill box.
- Marking the time on a calendar or asking family and friends to remind you.
- Always carrying a list of your medicines and their doses with you.

Take any blood pressure medicine exactly as prescribed. Don't stop or change your medicine unless advised to do so by your doctor.

Blood pressure and potassium

Generally people with high blood pressure are advised to increase their potassium intake through their diet. However, this recommendation may not apply to some people, such as people whose kidneys don't function normally or who are taking certain medicines. Ask your doctor for more information.

Other things you can do

You should also:

- Limit alcohol intake to no more than two drinks a day (men) or one drink a day (women).
- Be a non-smoker.
- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Heart Foundation's Health Information Service Tel. 1300 36 27 87
- For information on quitting smoking, call the Quitline Tel. 13 7848
- Medicines Line (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE 633 424 – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines

Things to remember

- High blood pressure (hypertension) can lead to serious problems like heart attack, stroke or kidney disease.
- High blood pressure usually does not have any symptoms, so you need to have your blood pressure checked regularly by your doctor.
- Making lifestyle changes is very important in helping to control high blood pressure. Ask your doctor for advice.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Heart Foundation

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