

# Understanding High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure (hypertension) is known as a silent killer. This is because it's a serious health problem, but doesn't often cause symptoms. Many people don't know they have it until it leads to other health problems.

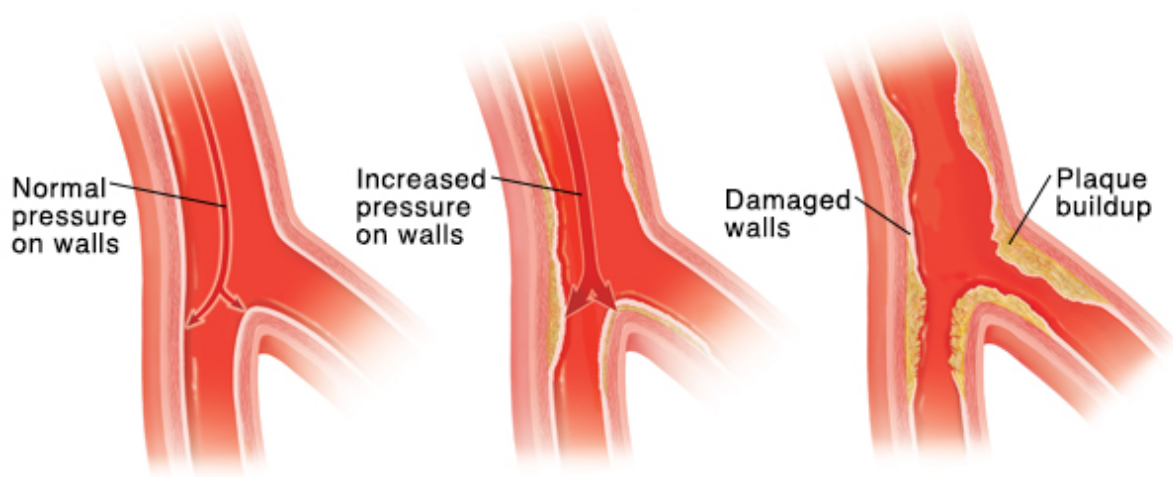
High blood pressure is 130/80 mmHg or above. If you're at this level for several readings over time, you'll be diagnosed with high blood pressure. Healthy changes can help you lower your blood pressure. But once you're diagnosed, you'll need to manage it for the rest of your life.

## What is blood pressure?

Your heart and blood vessels send blood through your body. This is called your circulatory system. Your heart is the pump for this system. With each heartbeat (contraction), the heart pushes blood through large blood vessels called arteries. Blood pressure is a measure of how hard the blood pushes against the walls of the arteries as it flows.

## How high blood pressure harms your health

In a healthy artery, the blood moves smoothly and puts normal pressure on its walls.



High blood pressure means the blood is pushing too hard against artery walls. This damages the walls. The walls form scar tissue as they heal. But the scar tissue makes the arteries stiff and weak. A fatty substance called plaque sticks to the scar tissue. This makes arteries narrower and harder.

High blood pressure:

- Causes your heart to work harder to get blood around your body
- Raises your risk for heart attack, heart failure, and stroke
- Can lead to kidney disease and blindness

## Measuring blood pressure

It's important to know your blood pressure numbers. A blood pressure reading is given as 2 numbers, such as 120/70. The top number is the pressure of blood against the artery walls

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during a heartbeat (systolic). The bottom number is the pressure of blood against artery walls between heartbeats (diastolic).

Blood pressure may be:

- **Normal:** lower than 120/lower than 80 mmHg
- **Elevated (prehypertensive):** 120-139/80-89 mmHg
- **High, Stage 1:** 130-139/80-89 mmHg
- **High, Stage 2:** 140/90 mmHg and higher

For most people with high blood pressure, keeping readings under 130/80 mmHg may help prevent health problems. Talk with your healthcare provider. Find out what your blood pressure goals should be. Tell them what questions or concerns you have about your readings.

## Controlling high blood pressure

If your blood pressure is high, work with your healthcare provider to make a plan for lowering it. They may prescribe medicine to help control your blood pressure if lifestyle changes aren't enough.

Below are changes you can make to help lower your blood pressure:

- **Choose heart-healthy foods.** Ask your provider about the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan. DASH limits sodium (salt). It includes a lot of fruits and vegetables, low-fat or nonfat dairy foods, whole grains, and other foods high in fiber and low in fat. This plan also includes more potassium. This can help lower blood pressure.
- **Reduce sodium.** Eating less sodium reduces fluid retention. Fluid retention is when your body holds on to too much water. Having too much salt increases blood volume and blood pressure. The American Heart Association (AHA) says to have no more than 1,500 mg of sodium a day. But because people in the U.S. eat so much salt, the AHA says cutting back to even 2,300 mg a day can help.
- **Stay at a healthy weight.** Being overweight makes you more likely to have high blood pressure. Losing excess weight helps lower blood pressure.
- **Exercise regularly.** Daily exercise helps your heart and blood vessels work better and stay healthier. It can help lower your blood pressure.
- **Don't smoke.** Smoking raises blood pressure. And it damages blood vessels.
- **Limit alcohol.** Drinking too much alcohol can raise blood pressure. Men should have no more than 2 drinks a day. Women should have no more than 1 a day. A drink is equal to 1 beer, a small glass of wine, or a shot of liquor.
- **Control stress.** Stress makes your heart work harder and beat faster. Managing stress in a healthy way helps you control your blood pressure.

## Facts about high blood pressure

- **High blood pressure is often a lifelong problem.** But it can be controlled with lifestyle changes and medicine.

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- **Blood pressure medicines need to be taken every day.** Stopping suddenly may cause a dangerous increase in pressure.
  - **Medicine is only 1 part of controlling high blood pressure.** You also need to manage your weight, get regular exercise, and change your eating habits.
  - **Hypertension isn't the same as stress.** Stress may be a factor in high blood pressure, but it's only 1 factor.
  - **Feeling OK doesn't mean your blood pressure is under control.** And feeling bad doesn't mean it's out of control. The only way to know for sure is to check your pressure regularly.