

How to Take Your Blood Pressure

Blood pressure is a measurement of how strongly your blood is pressing against the walls of your arteries. Arteries are blood vessels that carry blood from your heart throughout your body. Your health care provider takes your blood pressure at each office visit. You can also take your own blood pressure at home with a blood pressure monitor.

You may need to take your own blood pressure to:

- Confirm a diagnosis of high blood pressure (*hypertension*).
- Monitor your blood pressure over time.
- Make sure your blood pressure medicine is working.

Supplies needed:

- Blood pressure monitor.
- A chair to sit in. This should be a chair where you can sit upright with your back supported. **Do not** sit on a soft couch or an armchair.
- Table or desk.
- Small notebook and pencil or pen.

How to prepare

To get the most accurate reading, avoid the following for 30 minutes before you check your blood pressure:

- Drinking caffeine.
- Drinking alcohol.
- Eating.
- Smoking.
- Exercising.

Five minutes before you check your blood pressure:

- Use the bathroom and urinate so that you have an empty bladder.
- Sit quietly in a chair. **Do not** talk.

How to take your blood pressure



To check your blood pressure, follow the instructions in the manual that came with your blood pressure monitor. If you have a digital blood pressure monitor, the instructions may be as follows:

1. Sit up straight in a chair.
2. Place your feet on the floor. **Do not** cross your ankles or legs.
3. Rest your left arm at the level of your heart on a table or desk or on the arm of a chair.
4. Pull up your shirt sleeve.

5. Wrap the blood pressure cuff around the upper part of your left arm, 1 inch (2.5 cm) above your elbow. It is best to wrap the cuff around bare skin.
6. Fit the cuff snugly, but not too tightly, around your arm. You should be able to place only one finger between the cuff and your arm.
7. Position the cord so that it rests in the bend of your elbow.
8. Press the power button.
9. Sit quietly while the cuff inflates and deflates.
10. Read the digital reading on the monitor screen and write the numbers down (*record* them) in a notebook.
11. Wait 2–3 minutes, then repeat the steps, starting at step 1.

What does my blood pressure reading mean?

A blood pressure reading consists of a higher number over a lower number. Ideally, your blood pressure should be below 120/80. The first ("top") number is called the systolic pressure. It is a measure of the pressure in your arteries as your heart beats. The second ("bottom") number is called the diastolic pressure. It is a measure of the pressure in your arteries as the heart relaxes.

Blood pressure is classified into four stages. The following are the stages for adults who do not have a short-term serious illness or a chronic condition. Systolic pressure and diastolic pressure are measured in a unit called mm Hg (*millimeters of mercury*).

Normal

- Systolic pressure: below 120.
- Diastolic pressure: below 80.

Elevated

- Systolic pressure: 120–129.
- Diastolic pressure: below 80.

Hypertension stage 1

- Systolic pressure: 130–139.
- Diastolic pressure: 80–89.

Hypertension stage 2

- Systolic pressure: 140 or above.
- Diastolic pressure: 90 or above.

You can have elevated blood pressure or hypertension even if only the systolic or only the diastolic number in your reading is higher than normal.

Follow these instructions at home:

Medicines

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
- Tell your health care provider if you are having any side effects from blood pressure medicine.

General instructions

- Check your blood pressure as often as recommended by your health care provider.
- Check your blood pressure at the same time every day.
- Take your monitor to the next appointment with your health care provider to make sure that:
 - You are using it correctly.
 - It provides accurate readings.
- Understand what your goal blood pressure numbers are.
- Keep all follow-up visits. This is important.

General tips

- Your health care provider can suggest a reliable monitor that will meet your needs. There are several types of home blood pressure monitors.
- Choose a monitor that has an arm cuff. **Do not** choose a monitor that measures your blood pressure from your wrist or finger.
- Choose a cuff that wraps snugly, not too tight or too loose, around your upper arm. You should be able to fit only one finger between your arm and the cuff.
- You can buy a blood pressure monitor at most drugstores or online.

Where to find more information

American Heart Association: www.heart.org

Contact a health care provider if:

- Your blood pressure is consistently high.
- Your blood pressure is suddenly low.

Get help right away if:

- Your systolic blood pressure is higher than 180.
- Your diastolic blood pressure is higher than 120.

These symptoms may be an emergency. Get help right away. Call 911.

- **Do not wait to see if the symptoms will go away.**
- **Do not drive yourself to the hospital.**

Summary

- Blood pressure is a measurement of how strongly your blood is pressing against the walls of your arteries.
- A blood pressure reading consists of a higher number over a lower number. Ideally, your blood pressure should be below 120/80.
- Check your blood pressure at the same time every day.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, smoking, and exercise for 30 minutes prior to checking your blood pressure. These agents can affect the accuracy of the blood pressure reading.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

Hypertension, Adult

High blood pressure (*hypertension*) is when the force of blood pumping through the arteries is too strong. The arteries are the blood vessels that carry blood from the heart throughout the body. Hypertension forces the heart to work harder to pump blood and may cause arteries to become narrow or stiff. Untreated or uncontrolled hypertension can lead to a heart attack, heart failure, a stroke, kidney disease, and other problems.

A blood pressure reading consists of a higher number over a lower number. Ideally, your blood pressure should be below 120/80. The first ("top") number is called the systolic pressure. It is a measure of the pressure in your arteries as your heart beats. The second ("bottom") number is called the diastolic pressure. It is a measure of the pressure in your arteries as the heart relaxes.

What are the causes?

The exact cause of this condition is not known. There are some conditions that result in high blood pressure.

What increases the risk?

Certain factors may make you more likely to develop high blood pressure. Some of these risk factors are under your control, including:

- Smoking.
- Not getting enough exercise or physical activity.
- Being overweight.
- Having too much fat, sugar, calories, or salt (*sodium*) in your diet.
- Drinking too much alcohol.

Other risk factors include:

- Having a personal history of heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol, or kidney disease.
- Stress.
- Having a family history of high blood pressure and high cholesterol.
- Having obstructive sleep apnea.
- Age. The risk increases with age.

What are the signs or symptoms?

High blood pressure may not cause symptoms. Very high blood pressure (*hypertensive crisis*) may cause:

- Headache.
- Fast or irregular heartbeats (*palpitations*).
- Shortness of breath.
- Nosebleed.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Vision changes.
- Severe chest pain, dizziness, and seizures.

How is this diagnosed?

This condition is diagnosed by measuring your blood pressure while you are seated, with your arm resting on a flat surface, your legs uncrossed, and your feet flat on the floor. The cuff of the blood pressure monitor will be placed

directly against the skin of your upper arm at the level of your heart. Blood pressure should be measured at least twice using the same arm. Certain conditions can cause a difference in blood pressure between your right and left arms.

If you have a high blood pressure reading during one visit or you have normal blood pressure with other risk factors, you may be asked to:

- Return on a different day to have your blood pressure checked again.
- Monitor your blood pressure at home for 1 week or longer.

If you are diagnosed with hypertension, you may have other blood or imaging tests to help your health care provider understand your overall risk for other conditions.

How is this treated?

This condition is treated by making healthy lifestyle changes, such as eating healthy foods, exercising more, and reducing your alcohol intake. You may be referred for counseling on a healthy diet and physical activity.

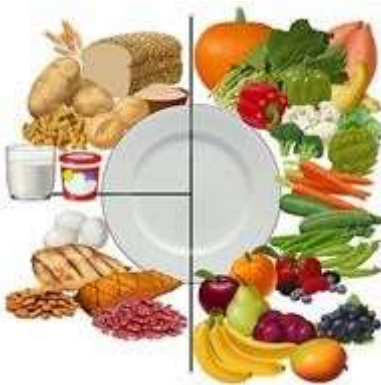
Your health care provider may prescribe medicine if lifestyle changes are not enough to get your blood pressure under control and if:

- Your systolic blood pressure is above 130.
- Your diastolic blood pressure is above 80.

Your personal target blood pressure may vary depending on your medical conditions, your age, and other factors.

Follow these instructions at home:

Eating and drinking



- Eat a diet that is high in fiber and potassium, and low in sodium, added sugar, and fat. An example of this eating plan is called the DASH diet. DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension. To eat this way:
 - Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. Try to fill one half of your plate at each meal with fruits and vegetables.
 - Eat whole grains, such as whole-wheat pasta, brown rice, or whole-grain bread. Fill about one fourth of your plate with whole grains.
 - Eat or drink low-fat dairy products, such as skim milk or low-fat yogurt.
 - Avoid fatty cuts of meat, processed or cured meats, and poultry with skin. Fill about one fourth of your plate with lean proteins, such as fish, chicken without skin, beans, eggs, or tofu.
 - Avoid pre-made and processed foods. These tend to be higher in sodium, added sugar, and fat.

- Reduce your daily sodium intake. Many people with hypertension should eat less than 1,500 mg of sodium a day.
- **Do not** drink alcohol if:
 - Your health care provider tells you not to drink.
 - You are pregnant, may be pregnant, or are planning to become pregnant.
- If you drink alcohol:
 - Limit how much you have to:
 - 0–1 drink a day for women.
 - 0–2 drinks a day for men.
 - Know how much alcohol is in your drink. In the U.S., one drink equals one 12 oz bottle of beer (355 mL), one 5 oz glass of wine (148 mL), or one 1½ oz glass of hard liquor (44 mL).

Lifestyle



- Work with your health care provider to maintain a healthy body weight or to lose weight. Ask what an ideal weight is for you.
- Get at least 30 minutes of exercise that causes your heart to beat faster (*aerobic exercise*) most days of the week. Activities may include walking, swimming, or biking.
- Include exercise to strengthen your muscles (*resistance exercise*), such as Pilates or lifting weights, as part of your weekly exercise routine. Try to do these types of exercises for 30 minutes at least 3 days a week.
- **Do not** use any products that contain nicotine or tobacco. These products include cigarettes, chewing tobacco, and vaping devices, such as e-cigarettes. If you need help quitting, ask your health care provider.
- Monitor your blood pressure at home as told by your health care provider.
- Keep all follow-up visits. This is important.

Medicines

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider. Follow directions carefully. Blood pressure medicines must be taken as prescribed.
- **Do not** skip doses of blood pressure medicine. Doing this puts you at risk for problems and can make the medicine less effective.
- Ask your health care provider about side effects or reactions to medicines that you should watch for.

Contact a health care provider if you:

- Think you are having a reaction to a medicine you are taking.
- Have headaches that keep coming back (*recurring*).
- Feel dizzy.
- Have swelling in your ankles.
- Have trouble with your vision.

Get help right away if you:

- Develop a severe headache or confusion.
- Have unusual weakness or numbness.
- Feel faint.
- Have severe pain in your chest or abdomen.
- Vomit repeatedly.
- Have trouble breathing.

These symptoms may be an emergency. Get help right away. Call 911.

- **Do not wait to see if the symptoms will go away.**
- **Do not drive yourself to the hospital.**

Summary

- Hypertension is when the force of blood pumping through your arteries is too strong. If this condition is not controlled, it may put you at risk for serious complications.
- Your personal target blood pressure may vary depending on your medical conditions, your age, and other factors. For most people, a normal blood pressure is less than 120/80.
- Hypertension is treated with lifestyle changes, medicines, or a combination of both. Lifestyle changes include losing weight, eating a healthy, low-sodium diet, exercising more, and limiting alcohol.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.