



High Blood Pressure (Hypertension) Information for Staywell Members

What Is High Blood Pressure?

Blood pressure is a measure of how hard the blood pushes against the walls of your arteries as it moves through your body. It's normal for blood pressure to go up and down during the day. But if it stays up, you have high blood pressure. This is also called hypertension.

When blood pressure is high, it starts to damage the blood vessels, heart and kidneys. This can lead to heart attack, stroke and other problems.

It is called a "silent killer." This is because it rarely causes symptoms while it is causing this damage.

Your blood pressure is made up of two numbers: systolic pressure and diastolic pressure.

- Someone with a systolic pressure of 120 and a diastolic pressure of 80 has a blood pressure of 120/80. (Or "120 over 80.")
- The first number shows how hard the blood pushes when the heart is pumping.
- The second number shows how hard the blood pushes between heartbeats.

Adults should have a blood pressure of less than 120/80. High blood pressure is 140/90 or higher. Many people fall in between. This is called pre-hypertension.

What Causes High Blood Pressure?

In most cases, doctors can't point to the exact cause. But there are things known to raise blood pressure. These are:

- Being overweight.
- Drinking too much alcohol.
- A family history of high blood pressure.
- Eating too much salt.
- Aging.

Your blood pressure may also rise if you:

- Are not very active.
- Don't eat enough potassium and calcium.
- Have a condition called insulin resistance.

What Are the Symptoms?

High blood pressure may not cause symptoms. Most people don't know they have it until they go to the doctor for some other reason.

Without treatment, high blood pressure can damage the heart, brain, kidneys or eyes. It can lead to:

- Coronary artery disease.
- Stroke.
- Kidney failure.

Very high blood pressure can cause headaches, vision problems and nausea. These signs can also be caused by something called malignant high blood pressure. This should be treated right away.

How Is High Blood Pressure Diagnosed?

Most people find out they have high blood pressure during a routine doctor visit. Your doctor will confirm that you have high blood pressure. This is when your blood pressure is at least 140/90 at three or more times. It is usually measured 1 to 2

weeks apart.

You may have to check your blood pressure at home if there is reason to think the readings in the doctor's office aren't right. You may have what is called white-coat hypertension. This is when blood pressure goes up just because you're at the doctor's office. Even little things can raise your blood pressure.

How Is It Treated?

Treatment depends on:

- How high your blood pressure is.
- If you have other health problems like diabetes.
- Whether any organs have already been damaged.

Your doctor will also consider how likely you are to develop other diseases.

You can help lower your blood pressure by making healthy changes. But if those changes don't work, you may also need to take pills. Either way, you will need to control your high blood pressure for the rest of your life.

- If you have pre-hypertension, your doctor will likely suggest lifestyle changes. These may be losing weight, being more active, not drinking alcohol, not smoking and changing your diet.
- If you have high blood pressure without any organ damage or other risk factors for heart disease, your doctor may suggest you take medicine and make lifestyle changes.
- If you have high blood pressure and some organ damage or other risk factors for heart disease, you may need to try different medicines and also make other changes.

Most people take more than one pill for high blood pressure. Work with your doctor to find the right pill or pills that will limit side effects.

It can be hard to remember to take pills. But your blood pressure will go back up if you don't take them every day. Make your pill schedule as simple as you can. Plan times to take your pills when you are doing other things, like eating a meal.

What Can You Do to Prevent High Blood Pressure?

There are six lifestyle changes you can make to help prevent high blood pressure:

- Lose weight.
- Eat less salt.
- Exercise.
- Limit alcohol to 2 drinks a day for men and 1 drink a day for women and lighter-weight men.
- Get 3,500mg of potassium in your diet every day. You can get this from foods like meat, fish, and many fruits and vegetables.
- Follow the DASH eating plan. This diet is rich in fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products.

References

Healthwise, Incorporated. High Blood Pressure (Hypertension). Author: Robin Parks, MS. Medical Review: Caroline S. Rhoads, MD (Internal Medicine), Robert A. Kloner, MD, PhD (Cardiology), Ruth Schneider, MPH, RD (Diet and Nutrition). April, 24, 2007.

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