

High Blood Pressure

What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood against the inside walls of your arteries. When your arteries become narrow, the pressure of the blood inside goes up. This causes **high blood pressure** (also called **hypertension**).

High blood pressure can damage your arteries, reduce blood flow to your organs, and make your heart work harder. If not controlled, it can lead to heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, blindness, and other health problems.

How is it diagnosed?

To measure your blood pressure, your healthcare provider will wrap a special cuff around your arm. The cuff is attached to a machine or gauge. When the cuff is inflated, it measures the pressure in your blood vessels in millimeters of mercury (mmHg).

Blood pressure is measured with 2 numbers, for example, “120 over 80” (written as 120/80). The first number is your **systolic pressure** (when your heart beats). The second number is your **diastolic pressure** (when your heart rests between beats). The table below shows the numbers for **normal**, **elevated**, and stage 1 and 2 for **high blood pressure**.

Your health care provider will check your blood pressure several times to determine if you have high blood pressure on a regular basis.

BP category	Systolic	/	Diastolic
Normal	less than 120	and	less than 80
Elevated	120 to 129	and	less than 80
Stage 1 High	130 to 139	or	80 to 89
Stage 2 High	140 or higher	or	90 or higher



Important keys to blood pressure control are **reducing the amount of sodium (salt) in your diet**, a **healthy diet rich in fruits and vegetables**, and **regular physical activity**.

What causes it?

Most commonly, high blood pressure develops a little at a time over many years. Certain things can increase your risk for high blood pressure. These are called **risk factors**. Some you cannot change, others you can. Check your risk factors on the list below. See the next page for tips on managing the risk factors you can control.

Risk factors you CANNOT change	Risk factors you CAN change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Family history <input type="checkbox"/> Age: Risk increases as you age <input type="checkbox"/> Race: Risk increases in African Americans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Physical inactivity <input type="checkbox"/> Being overweight or obese <input type="checkbox"/> Diet <input type="checkbox"/> Smoking and tobacco use <input type="checkbox"/> Stress <input type="checkbox"/> Use of birth control pills

What are the symptoms?

Rarely, people with high blood pressure may have dizziness, headaches, or nose bleeds. However, **most people don't have any signs or symptoms**. For this reason, you should have your blood pressure checked regularly, even if you're feeling fine.

Manage your BP with MAWDS

“MAWDS” is a word that can help you manage your risk factors and your blood pressure. It means:



Medicine — Take your medicine.

If your doctor prescribes blood pressure medicine, the best way to manage your blood pressure is to take it every day, even if you feel fine. Even if your blood pressure has reached its goal, it may not stay there without your medicines.



Activity — Stay active every day.

Staying active is one of the best ways to control your blood pressure. People who are active cut in half their risk of getting high blood pressure. Aim for at least 30 minutes every day of moderate-intensity physical activity — like a brisk walk.



Weight — Maintain a healthy weight.

Being overweight increases your risk of high blood pressure. Losing even 5 to 10 percent of your current weight can lower your risk. If you weigh 200 pounds, that means losing just 10 to 20 pounds.



Diet — Eat a healthy diet.

Studies have shown that following a healthy eating plan — such as the **DASH diet** described on this page — lowers your blood pressure. This diet can also help prevent other serious problems like osteoporosis, cancer, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.



Smoking, and Stress — Stop smoking, manage stress.

Tobacco use harms your arteries and increases your blood pressure. Lots of stress over many months or years also can hurt your body. Quitting smoking and learning to manage stress can lower your blood pressure and improve your overall health.

Do the DASH

DASH stands for **Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension**. The **DASH** eating plan helps you to:

- **Lower the sodium (salt) in your diet.**
The standard DASH diet allows up to 2,400 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day. A lower-sodium DASH diet calls for less than 1,500 mg of sodium a day.
- **Follow a healthy diet in general**, rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables, fat-free or low-fat milk products, fish and poultry, beans, seeds, and nuts.

How it works

The **DASH eating plan** suggests a certain number of daily servings from various food groups based on your calorie intake. Your doctor or dietitian can give you more information on the DASH diet. For now, you can start with the tips below.

General tips

- **Avoid high-sodium foods.** Foods that come in cans, boxes, and bags are often high in sodium, as are foods that come from the deli, like ham, salami, potato salad, and pickles.
- **Read food labels carefully.** Foods with more than 20% of the Daily Value are considered “high-sodium.” Check the serving size. This is what the nutrition facts are based on.
- **Limit alcohol.** Men should have no more than 2 drinks per day. Women should have no more than one drink per day. (One drink is 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1 ounce of hard liquor.)
- **Change a little at a time.** For example, add a serving of vegetables at lunch and dinner. Add a serving of fruit to your meals or as a snack. Use half your usual amount of butter or salad dressing.

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