

BLOOD PRESSURE

Blood pressure is the pressure of the blood in your arteries (the blood vessels that carry oxygen and nutrients to the body) as it is pumped around the body by the heart. It is expressed as systolic and diastolic blood pressure, e.g. 120/80. The systolic reading (higher number) represents the pressure in the arteries as the heart contracts and blood is pumped around the body. The diastolic reading (lower number) represents the pressure in the arteries as they relax in between heart contractions.



WHAT IS 'NORMAL BLOOD' PRESSURE?

A normal blood pressure reading is below 120 (systolic) and below 80 (diastolic).

LOW BLOOD PRESSURE

Low blood pressure is typically a reading of around 90/50, yet for some people it may be higher or lower than this, depending on genetics, fitness and other lifestyle factors. Symptoms include feeling lightheaded, dizzy or even faint when moving from a standing to sitting position or vice versa.

WHAT IS HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

High blood pressure is one of the most common disorders affecting the heart and blood vessel. Blood pressure goes up and down during the day depending on the time of the day and what you are doing. However, when blood pressure is consistently high it can potentially cause damage to your heart, brain and other important organs. The medical term for persistently high blood pressure is hypertension.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

To find out if you have high blood pressure it is important to have your blood pressure measured regularly. The serious effects of high blood pressure usually develop only after it has been high for some years. In the meantime, there are often no symptoms to warn you. Certain substances in the body can cause a high blood pressure reading in the short term.

BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORY	SYSTOLIC (UPPER) Mm Hg	DIASTOLIC (LOWER) Mm Hg
Normal	Less than 120	Less than 80
Prehypertension	120 - 139	80 - 89
High Blood Pressure Stage 1	140 - 159	90 - 99
High Blood Pressure Stage 2	160 or higher	100 and higher
High Blood Pressure Stage 3	180 and over	Higher than 110



Try to avoid the following substances for at least an hour if you know you are going to have your blood pressure measured:

- Nicotine
- Caffeine
- High Salt Foods



WHAT CAUSES HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

The exact cause of high blood pressure is often not clear. Normally, your blood vessels detect temporary changes in your blood pressure and send messages to your brain to keep the pressure within healthy limits. If the pressure stays high for long enough, your system adjusts to a higher level. For some people, certain medications such as the contraceptive pill, Steroidal medicines and arthritis medications can also raise blood pressure.

“Certain factors such as your age, gender, family history, diet, activity levels, body weight, stress levels, smoking and alcohol intake all have a strong influence on your blood pressure.”

WHY IS IMPORTANT TO CONTROL HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

It is important to control your high blood pressure because having high blood pressure is one of the main risk factors for cardiovascular conditions such as a heart attack, stroke and heart and blood vessel disease. If it is not controlled, high blood pressure can overload the heart and blood vessels and speed up the artery-clogging process known as atherosclerosis, which can lead to heart attack and stroke. A stroke can also happen due to weaknesses in the walls of the blood vessels and brain caused by high blood pressure, which leads to weekended vessels to burst. This is called a ‘cerebral hemorrhage’.

High blood pressure can also affect the arteries to other parts of the body, such as the eyes, kidneys and legs. In addition, the higher your blood pressure is, the harder your heart must work to pump blood around your body. If left untreated, the heart may weaken due to the extra demand placed upon it and as a result will not be able to do its job as efficiently. This may lead to a heart failure; serious condition with symptoms such as tiredness, shortness of breath and swelling of the feet and ankles.

HOW CAN I CONTROL MY BLOOD PRESSURE?

The healthy lifestyle changes that promote a healthy blood pressure include:

- Maintain a healthy body weight
- Be physically active every day
- Limit alcohol intake
- Quit smoking
- Manage stress
- Decrease salt intake, increase potassium



Even if you take your medication to control your blood pressure, it is still important to make healthy lifestyle choices to help the medication do its job and to improve overall health.

ENJOY HEALTHY EATING

Having a healthy diet is particularly important for controlling high blood pressure and reducing the risk of heart disease. Choose mainly plant-based foods such as vegetables, fruits, legumes (e.g. chickpeas, kidney beans, lentils, cannellini beans) and plain unsalted nuts and seeds. Go for the wholegrain versions of cereals, breads, pasta and rice, and try alternative grains such as barley, quinoa, millet, rye and buckwheat. Consume moderate amounts of lean unprocessed meats, poultry and dairy products. Include a 150g serve of oily fish two to three times a week, use extra virgin olive oil and include avocado for healthy fats. Avoid highly processed foods that are high in sodium or salt and use moderation when adding salt to your meals.

LIMIT ALCOHOL INTAKE

Drinking too much alcohol increases your blood pressure. If your blood pressure is already high, you should limit your intake to no more than two standard drinks per day (for men) and one drink per day (for women). Alcohol can interact with some medications and can reduce their effectiveness. Ask your health professional if you have any questions.

BE ACTIVE EVERY DAY

The good news is that physical activity does not have to be vigorous for you to reap the benefits – moderate activity such as brisk walking is great for your health. Aim to do at least 30 minutes of moderate activity on most if not all days of the week. This could also include things like gardening, doing household chores and having a hit of tennis with friends. See it all as an opportunity to move, not an inconvenience – even if it is broken into smaller blocks instead of a solid 30 minutes, it all helps!

For more information, see your GP or visit www.heartfondation.org.au



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