

AgePage

High Blood Pressure: Tips for Keeping It Under Control

You can have high blood pressure (HBP) and still feel just fine. That's because HBP does not cause symptoms. But, HBP (sometimes called hypertension) is a major health problem. If not treated, it can lead to stroke, heart disease, kidney failure, and other health problems. The good news is that there are ways you can prevent and control HBP and the trouble it can cause.

What Is HBP?

As blood flows from your heart to your blood vessels, it pushes against the walls of your blood vessels. This pressure is measured in millimeters of mercury (mmHg). The reading often is recorded as two numbers—the pressure while the heart beats (systolic pressure) over the pressure while the heart relaxes between beats

(diastolic pressure). The numbers are written one above or before the other. The systolic number comes first, or on top, and the diastolic number comes second, or on the bottom.

Normal blood pressure is less than 130 mmHg systolic and less than 85 mmHg diastolic (130/85 or lower). Doctors will say your blood pressure is too high when it measures 140/90 mmHg or higher over time.

People who have blood pressure in the range of 130-139/85-89 mmHg may be at risk of developing HBP. If your blood pressure measures in this range, you should think about making lifestyle changes to improve your blood pressure.

Do You Have HBP?

Get your blood pressure checked when you see your doctor to find out if you have HBP. Your doctor may say your blood pressure is high if it measures too high at two or more checkups. Your doctor also may ask you to check your blood pressure at home at different times of the day.

What If Just the First Number Is High?

For older people, the first number (systolic) often is high (greater than 140 mmHg), while the second number (diastolic) is normal (less than 90 mmHg). This condition is called isolated systolic hypertension (ISH). For most people, systolic blood pressure rises over time as they age. Diastolic blood pressure rises only until about age 55 and then starts to go down. ISH is the most common form of HBP in older people.

ISH can lead to serious health problems. It should be treated. Treatment can save lives, reduce illness, and improve a person's quality of life. Yet, many older people do not have their high systolic blood pressure under control. If your systolic pressure is over 140 mmHg, ask your doctor how you can lower it.

How Can You Prevent and Control HBP?

There is a lot you can do to prevent HBP. These same healthy habits will help you keep HBP under control.

- ◆ **Keep a healthy weight.** Being overweight adds to your risk of HBP. Ask your doctor if your weight puts you at risk for HBP and if you need to lose weight.

- ◆ **Exercise each day.** Moderate exercise can lower your risk of heart disease. Try to exercise at least 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week or more. Check with your doctor before starting a new exercise plan if you have a chronic health problem, or if you are over age 40 (men) or 50 (women).
- ◆ **Eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy foods.** A healthy diet is important. To control HBP, eat a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products.
- ◆ **Cut down on salt.** Most Americans eat more salt than they need. A low-salt diet will help lower your blood pressure. Also, avoid foods that come already prepared, as they often are high in salt. Talk with your doctor about your salt intake.
- ◆ **Drink less alcohol.** Drinking alcohol can affect your blood pressure. The effect is different for each person. As a general rule, scientists suggest that men limit alcohol to no more than two drinks a day. For women and lighter weight people, they suggest no more than one drink a day.

HBP Facts

If you have HBP, remember that:

- ◆ HBP may not make you feel sick, but it is serious. See a doctor to treat it.
- ◆ You can lower your blood pressure by changing your daily habits and, if needed, by taking medicine. If you need to take HBP medicine, these lifestyle changes may help lower the dose you need and lessen side effects.
- ◆ Tell your doctor about all the drugs you take. Be sure to mention over-the-counter drugs. They may affect your blood pressure. They also can affect how well your blood pressure medicine works.
- ◆ Take your blood pressure medicine at the same time each day. For example, take your medicine in the morning with breakfast or in the evening after brushing your teeth. If you miss a dose of your medicine, do not double the dose the next day. Call your doctor to find out what to do.
- ◆ **Take your HBP medicine just as your doctor directs.** If lifestyle changes alone do not control your HBP, your doctor may tell you to take blood pressure medicine. You may need to take your HBP medicine for the rest of your life. If you have questions about your medicine, talk to your doctor.

Resources

For more information about HBP, contact:

**National Heart, Lung,
and Blood Institute
Health Information Center**

P.O. Box 30105

Bethesda, MD 20824-0105

Phone: 301-592-8573

Fax: 301-592-8563

E-mail: NHLBIinfo@rover.nhlbi.nih.gov

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>

The National Institute on Aging (NIA) has an exercise guide and video developed just for older people. For information on ordering this or other NIA resources, contact:

**National Institute on Aging
Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225

1-800-222-4225 (TTY)

E-mail: niainfo@jbs1.com

<http://www.nia.nih.gov>



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