

Understanding High Blood Pressure


Knowing your blood pressure numbers is important for your heart and overall health. If untreated, high blood pressure can damage your heart, brain, kidneys, and eyes.

Use this handout to learn about high blood pressure and what you can do.

What is blood pressure?

Your **blood pressure** is a measure of how hard your blood pushes against the walls of your arteries. You've probably heard it given as two numbers. For example, a healthy blood pressure is less than 120 over 80 mm Hg.

- **The first (top) number** is how hard the blood pushes when your heart beats.
- **The second (bottom) number** is how hard the force of blood is when your heart relaxes between beats.



High blood pressure is the #1 preventable risk factor for heart disease, heart attack and stroke. Take steps to keep your blood pressure low to protect your heart.

What do the numbers mean?

	NORMAL	ELEVATED	HIGH
Top Number: SYSTOLIC (mm Hg)	<i>below</i> 120	120 <i>to</i> 129	STAGE 1 130 <i>to</i> 139 or STAGE 2 140 <i>and above</i>
Bottom Number: DIASTOLIC (mm Hg)	and <i>below</i> 80	and <i>below</i> 80	or 80 <i>to</i> 89 or 90 <i>and above</i>
			Also called <i>Hypertension</i>

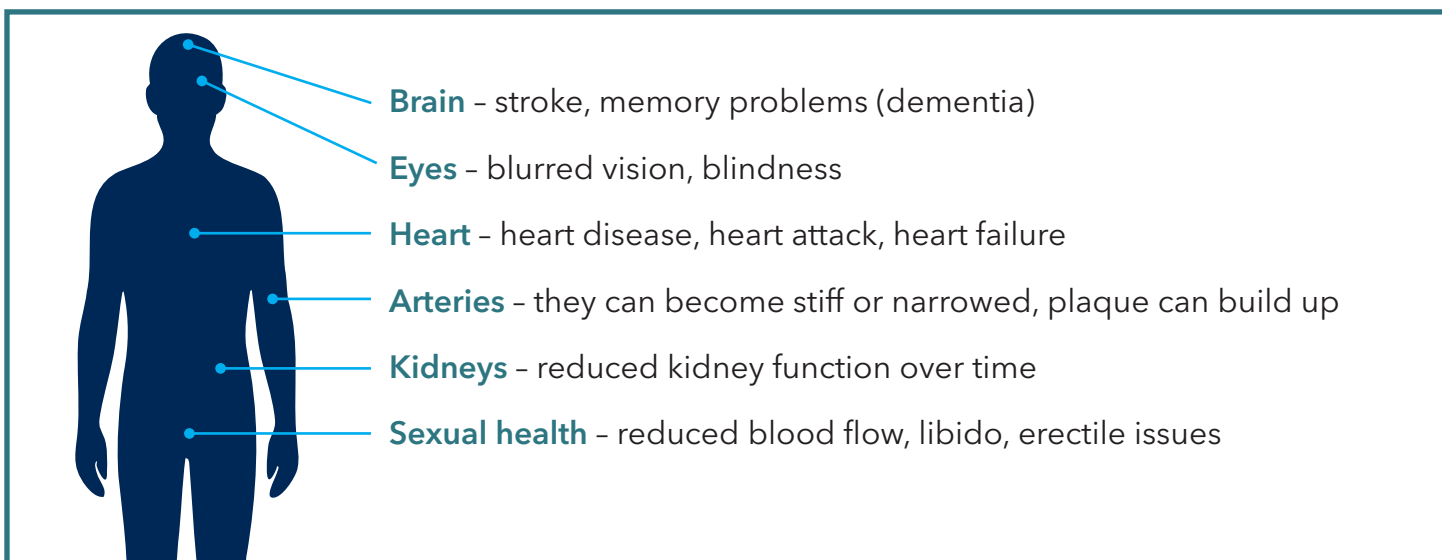


Did you know your heart pumps about **2,000 gallons of blood every day**? With each beat, it delivers nutrients and oxygen to all of the organs and tissues in your body.

What if my blood pressure is high?

If your blood pressure is higher than it should be, your heart has to work harder. High blood pressure (also called hypertension) can **slowly damage your arteries and your heart**.

Many people have high blood pressure and don't know it. That's because it often has no symptoms. So even if you feel fine, high blood pressure can still lead to serious problems. It can affect many parts of the body:



Who gets high blood pressure?

Anyone can develop high blood pressure. But certain conditions (risk factors) can make it more likely.

Age 55 or older 	Family history - be sure to ask! 	Carrying excess weight 	Not getting enough physical activity 	Eating a lot of salt (sodium) and too little potassium 
Drinking too much alcohol 	Smoking 	Diabetes, kidney disease, sleep apnea 	Poor sleep 	Too much stress 

Taking charge of your blood pressure

You can't change your age or family history. But there's a lot you can do to keep your blood pressure in check.

The first step? Know your numbers – and track them over time.

Even if you feel fine, your blood pressure could be too high.

Talk with your care team about:

- Your blood pressure readings.
- Your blood pressure goal (the number you want to get to).
- How to monitor your blood pressure using a reliable home blood pressure monitor and share your readings. This helps you and your care team decide if it's time to start medicine and whether your treatment is working.

View our
handout on
how to check
BP accurately
at home



High blood pressure is more common in Black adults. Talk with your health care team about checking your blood pressure and focusing on heart-healthy habits.



Preventing and treating high blood pressure

If your blood pressure is normal:

- Healthy lifestyle choices can help keep it low.

If your blood pressure is starting to climb, but it's not yet "high":

- Commit to making simple lifestyle changes – like moving more, avoiding alcohol, and eating less sodium (and more potassium if you don't have kidney disease).
- Re-check your blood pressure in a few months to see what it is.

If your blood pressure is high (mm Hg):

Stage 1 (top number 130-139 OR bottom number 80-89)	Stage 2 (top number 140 and above OR bottom number 90 and above)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set a blood pressure goal and write it down. • Step up efforts to adopt healthy habits. • Re-check within 3-6 months or sooner to see if you should start taking medication to help lower your blood pressure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy lifestyle changes + medicines. • Monthly visits and blood pressure checks to make sure blood pressure is coming down.

If you have other risk factors (diabetes, kidney disease, high likelihood of developing heart disease), you may be started on medicine earlier.

Healthy habits

Small changes can make a big difference in your blood pressure and overall heart health.



Move more

Get regular physical activity



Lose weight, if needed

Losing just a few pounds makes a big difference



Cut down on salt (sodium)

Aim for less than 1 teaspoon a day (that's about 2,300 mg of sodium)



Eat smart

Follow the DASH diet and eat potassium-rich vegetables



Avoid, limit alcohol

For men, not more than 2 drinks per day; for women, 1



Don't smoke or vape



Lower stress

Meditation and rest help



Get good sleep

Aim for 7-8 hours per night

Medications

Sometimes healthy habits aren't enough to get blood pressure where it should be. Medicine + lifestyle changes can help lower blood pressure and protect your heart.

Common go-to medicines to help lower blood pressure include:



- **Diuretics (water pills):**
Help your body get rid of extra salt and water.
- **ACE inhibitors or ARBs:**
Help blood vessels relax, lowering the blood pressure.
- **Calcium channel blockers:**
Help blood vessels relax and stay open.

You may need to take more than one medicine – **or a combination pill** – to reach your goal.

Don't forget!

Tell your care team about:

- Any side effects
- All the medicines you take – some can raise blood pressure
- Worries about costs or getting to your appointments



If your blood pressure is still high – even after taking 3 or more medicines – there may be other options to consider and talk with your care team about.



For more information, questions to ask, and easy-to-use tools, visit [CardioSmart.org/HighBP](https://www.cardiosmart.org/HighBP)