

BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORIES FOR ADULTS

RATING	SYSTOLIC PRESSURE	DIASTOLIC PRESSURE
NORMAL	Less than 120 mmHg	Less than 80 mmHg
PREHYPERTENSION	120–139 mmHg	80–89 mmHg
HYPERTENSION		
Stage 1	140–159 mmHg	90–99 mmHg
Stage 2	160 mmHg or higher	100 mmHg or higher

NOTE: If the systolic and diastolic pressures fall into different categories, overall blood pressure is in the highest category.

MODERATE ACTIVITY COMES IN ALL FORMS

Becoming more physically active doesn't mean doing strenuous exercise. Just 30 minutes of moderate-level activity on most days of the week will make a big difference. And you don't have to do it all at once: You can also divide the 30 minutes into shorter periods of at least 10 minutes each. These common activities are moderate-level exercise:

- brisk walking
- bicycling
- raking leaves or gardening
- pushing a stroller
- wheeling yourself in a wheelchair

Make exercise a part of your daily routine: Use the stairs instead of an elevator, or park your car at the far end of the lot and walk farther to work.

For more information: Talk to your physician or visit controlhypertension.org.

Keeping Blood Pressure Under Control

As its name implies, blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of the arteries. The heart pumps blood into the arteries, which carry blood to all parts of the body. With each heart beat, blood pressure is at its highest. This is called *systolic blood pressure*. When the heart is resting, between beats, blood pressure falls. This is called *diastolic blood pressure*.

Blood pressure readings are usually written as a fraction, with systolic pressure on top and diastolic pressure on the bottom (read as "120 over 80"). Or it can be written as systolic and then diastolic pressure, separated by a forward slash (120/80). Blood pressure is measured in millimeters of mercury (mmHg).



WHAT IS HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

High blood pressure, or *hypertension*, is a condition that usually has no symptoms and yet is known as the "silent killer" because it can threaten your health without making you feel sick.

Millions of Americans—nearly 1 in 3—have hypertension. Because it has no symptoms, the only way to know if you have hypertension is to have a doctor check your blood pressure with a simple and painless blood pressure test.

Though hypertension usually doesn't go away once you develop it, there's still good news: it can be treated and controlled with healthy lifestyle changes and medications that your doctor can prescribe.

WHAT SHOULD MY NUMBERS BE?

Normal blood pressure is below 120/80 mmHg. Readings between 120/80 mmHg and 139/89 mmHg are considered "prehypertension": you don't have high blood pressure now but show signs of developing it in the future.

If either (or both) the systolic or diastolic numbers are above 140/90 mmHg on two or more readings taken on several occasions, your doctor may want to talk with you about high blood pressure. For people with diabetes or kidney disease, however, blood pressure is considered high if the reading is above 130/80 mmHg.

WHY IS HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE DANGEROUS?

Untreated high blood pressure forces the heart to work harder than it should. This can cause the heart to get larger, which may lead to heart failure. Untreated high blood pressure can also lead to a host of health problems: it can contribute to hardening of the arteries (atherosclerosis), increasing the risk of heart attack, stroke, and kidney failure.

WHO IS AT RISK FOR IT?

Anyone can develop high blood pressure. High blood pressure is more common in:

- People who are overweight;
- People who have "prehypertension"
- People as they age (but high blood pressure is *not* a normal part of healthy aging);
- African-Americans
- People with a family history of high blood pressure.

CAN IT BE TREATED OR PREVENTED?

Some people can prevent or control high blood pressure by adopting a healthier lifestyle:

- *Eat a healthy diet* that includes fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products. Cutting down on salt and sodium in the diet and limiting alcohol intake can also help.
- *Be physically active!* All you need is 30 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week (*see box*).
- *Lose excess weight and stay at a healthy weight.* Losing even 10 pounds can lower blood pressure.

Even if you make these lifestyle changes, however, your blood pressure can still be too high. Your doctor may want you to take blood pressure medications *along with* making lifestyle changes.

- *Diuretics* ("water pills") flush excess water and salt from the body
- *Beta blockers* help your heart beat with less force
- *Angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors* prevent blood vessels from narrowing
- *Angiotensin II receptor blockers (ARBs)* allow blood vessels to relax and become wider
- *Calcium channel blockers (CCBs)* help blood vessels to relax
- *Alpha blockers* help blood pass through blood vessels more easily
- *Alpha/beta blockers* combine the actions of alpha and beta blockers
- *Vasodilators* open blood vessels, causing blood pressure to go down

Sometimes combinations of medications work best. Your doctor will work with you to find the best medications for you.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I CHECK MY BLOOD PRESSURE?

Your blood pressure should be checked regularly. Ask your doctor what your blood pressure goal should be. Once you've reached your blood pressure goal, guidelines suggest that you have it monitored every 3 to 6 months.

Work with your doctor to find the best ways to keep your blood pressure under control, so that high blood pressure doesn't have a chance to threaten your health.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—NIH, NHLBI website. Available at <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/nbp/intro.htm>. Accessed on June 2, 2005.