



Condition Center: High Blood Pressure

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High blood pressure, otherwise known as hypertension, is technically any blood pressure above 130/80, [Soma Mandal, MD](#), internist at Summit Health Symptoms, says. While symptoms can include headaches, fatigue, chest pain, shortness of breath, and feeling irritable, per [Mayo Clinic](#), the majority of people with high blood pressure show no symptoms, which is why it's often referred to as a silent killer — and why it's so important to know the risk factors and when to see a doctor.

Understanding High Blood Pressure

Blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of our arteries. It's typically expressed as two numbers — indicating systolic blood pressure and diastolic blood pressure — written one on top of the other, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#).

The systolic blood pressure is the peak pressure during a heartbeat, while the heart is "squeezing" diastolic blood pressure is the lowest pressure between two heart beats while the heart is "relaxed". For most age groups, men and women, normal average blood pressure listed by the CDC is

120/80 mmHg. For kids blood pressure varies by age, height and sex of the child ([this chart](#) can help you figure out where your little one stands).

There are several stages of hypertension in adults, [according to the CDC](#):

- Normal: systolic less than 120 mm Hg/diastolic: less than 80 mm Hg
- At risk: systolic 120-129/diastolic less than 80 mmHg
- Hypertension: systolic 130 or higher, diastolic 80 or higher

If your blood pressure reaches 180/120 mmHg or higher, that's considered a hypertensive crisis, per Cleveland Clinic. If you ever get this reading, call your doctor immediately, says Jennifer Wong, MD, cardiologist and medical director of noninvasive cardiology at MemorialCare Heart and Vascular Institute at Orange Coast Medical Center.

If you have a high blood pressure reading of any kind, plus symptoms of organ damage, including headache, vision changes, weakness, numbness, chest pain or shortness of breath, you should call 911, Dr. Wong says.

And even if you experience no symptoms besides a high reading at your annual doctor visit, hypertension shouldn't be ignored. "Over time, higher blood pressures can lead to hardening of the arteries and plaque buildup within the arteries," says Dr. Wong. "This leads to decreased blood supply and oxygen to organs. Heart attacks can occur when there is a lack of blood flow to the heart, and strokes can occur when there is a lack of blood flow to the brain."

Causes of High Blood Pressure

Hypertension can occur with age, but other factors can contribute as well. Struggling with sleep or weight, eating too much salt, not getting enough exercise, drinking too much alcohol, and stress can also lead to hypertension, Dr. Mandal says. These factors tend to cause the body to retain fluid, release hormones, and/or add pressure and constrict blood vessels that results in higher blood pressure, per AARP and Mayo Clinic.

Some health conditions like diabetes, as well as medications such as NSAIDS (like Advil, Motrin, Ibuprofen or Aleve) or cold medications (like Sudafed) can increase the risk for developing hypertension as well. Decongestants in particular tend to narrow the blood vessels, making it harder for blood to flow through them, increasing blood pressure, while pain and anti-

inflammatory medications increase your water retention, creating kidney problems and increasing your blood pressure, Mayo Clinic reports.

Having family members with high blood pressure can also increase your risk of the condition, per Cleveland Clinic. As the CDC explains, "genes likely play some role in high blood pressure, heart disease, and other related conditions. However, it is also likely that people with a family history of high blood pressure share common environments and other potential factors that increase their risk."

Most Effective Treatments For High Blood Pressure

There are several ways to reduce high blood pressure, and if your hypertension isn't too advanced – or if it's normal, but you have a strong family history of the condition, which is a risk factor – your doctor may suggest taking steps to change your lifestyle first.

These strategies might include:

Exercise. Movement can help prevent some of the damage that can occur with hypertension, as well as help lower blood pressure to some extent. Dr. Wong suggests participating in moderate intensity aerobic exercise 150 minutes per week.

Diet. Not dieting, but making sure to eat a healthy, balanced diet. Studies show the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet has also been shown to reduce blood pressure. This is a diet high in vegetables, fruits, low-fat dairy products, whole grains, poultry, fish, and nuts and low in sweets, sugar-sweetened beverages, and red meats. The diet is rich in potassium, magnesium, calcium, protein, and fiber but low in saturated fat, total fat, and cholesterol. "Helpful habits include limiting salt intake to 2.3 grams of sodium per day, limiting alcohol intake, and cutting out smoking," Dr. Wong says.

Stress reduction. When the body is in a state of stress, it releases more of the hormone cortisol. Health experts say increased cortisol is linked to more plaque buildup and narrowing of the arteries. Decrease stress by prioritizing quality sleep.

But if these steps don't help reduce your blood pressure to normal levels, there are also medications that can help. Diuretics, ACE-inhibitors, ARBs, and calcium-channel blockers are commonly used for hypertension treatment. They help relax the veins and arteries to lower blood pressure, per Mayo Clinic. If medications are required, Dr. Wong says there are plenty of options "not associated with any major side effects and are well tolerated if needed."