

Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)

This handout explains what high blood pressure is and provides simple tips to lower your blood pressure and keep it within the normal range.

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of arteries. It is recorded as two numbers. The systolic pressure is the top number (i.e., 120 mmHg). It occurs as the heart squeezes. The diastolic pressure is the lower number (i.e., 80 mmHg). It occurs as the heart rests between beats. This is written as 120/80 or said as 120 over 80.

What is hypertension (high blood pressure)?

High blood pressure is diagnosed when your blood pressure is at or above 130/80 twice when taken at different times. It is important to check your blood pressure at home to confirm the diagnosis. Your health care team is here to help you make a plan.

This is a very common but serious illness. It often is called a silent disease because in the early stages it rarely has any symptoms. People do not feel ill. If not treated, it makes the heart work too hard causing the walls of the arteries to become hard. This can lead to heart disease, strokes, kidney failure, and blindness.

High blood pressure can happen to anyone of any age, sex, or race. Experts believe that one in three American adults have high blood pressure. Once it occurs, it tends to last a lifetime. You can prevent and control high blood pressure by taking action.

If you have not been diagnosed with hypertension (high blood pressure), it is best for your health to get your blood pressure to

be <130/80 mmHg. Please talk with your doctor or nurse to make a plan for your goal range.

What causes hypertension?

The cause of high blood pressure is not always known.

Risk Factors

While you can control some risk factors, others are out of your control. They are called **unmodifiable risk factors**. You may have a higher risk of high blood pressure if any of the following apply:

1. **Family history of high blood pressure.** If close family members (parents, siblings, children) have had high blood pressure, you may have it.
2. **Family history of heart disease** in males under age 55 years old and in females under age 65 years old.
3. **Race.** African-Americans tend to have high blood pressure at a younger age and more often than Caucasians. It can be more severe.
4. **Gender and age:** High blood pressure is more common in men over the age of 45 and women over the age of 55.

Risk factors that can be improved with lifestyle changes are called **modifiable risk factors**. They include:

- Being overweight
- Having high cholesterol
- Using tobacco
- Drinking alcohol
- Eating too much salt
- Inactive lifestyle
- The use of oral contraceptives and hormones to treat menopause

Ways to Manage Hypertension

Making changes in your lifestyle is the first and best way to help manage high blood pressure. These include:

1. **Lose weight.** This is the single best way to lower blood pressure. A loss of even 5-10 pounds of weight can lower your blood pressure. The DASH diet (“Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension”) is one diet that may be helpful. The DASH diet is high in fiber, potassium, calcium, and magnesium, and low in salt. It is rich in fruits and vegetables. This diet is low in saturated and total fat which includes low fat dairy products. If you need help with weight loss or would like details on the DASH diet, ask your health care provider or visit a dietician.
2. **Eat less salt.** You should eat <1500 mg per day of salt or sodium. Food labels list the amount of salt in each food item.
3. **Exercise regularly.** It is best to exercise for 40 minutes at least 4 days of the week for a minimum of 2 ½ hours total per week (150 minutes). Aerobic exercise such as walking fast, swimming, jogging, and/or cross-country skiing are best. You can also do strength training with weights or resistance bands. If you cannot do this type of exercise, there are other options your health care team can give you to increase your physical activity level. Do not start an exercise program or increase your present activity level without

first talking with your health care provider.

4. **Limit the amount of alcohol you drink.** For men, do not drink more than 2 drinks with alcohol per day. For women, do not drink more than 1 drink with alcohol per day. One drink means one beer, one glass of wine, or one mixed drink. These amounts are similar in alcohol content:

12 oz of beer = 4 oz of wine = 1 oz of 100 proof whiskey.
5. **Stop using tobacco.** If you are unable to quit on your own, there are many options to help you stop using tobacco. Smoking cessation classes, pills, nicotine patches, sprays, inhalers, lozenges, and gum have helped many people quit. There is also the Wisconsin Tobacco Quit Line. This provides advice and self-help tools and can set you up with local quit smoking programs. The Quit Line number is toll-free **1-877-270-7867**. Ask your health care team for details.

Talk with your doctor or nurse to see how you may best work these changes into your routine.

Be sure you take any medicine you were given to control your blood pressure as ordered. If you have more questions, call your health care provider.

The Spanish version of this *Health Facts for You* is #4462s.