

# Treating High Blood Pressure: Lifestyle Changes and Drugs

## What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is a measure of how hard your blood pushes against the walls of your arteries. Most people with high blood pressure do not have symptoms. Because of this, it is called a “silent killer.”

Over time, high blood pressure can cause serious problems like heart failure and stroke. But the good news is that there are many effective treatments.

## What do blood pressure numbers mean?

Blood pressure is written as one number over another, like this: 120/80.

The top number is the pressure when your heart beats. It is called the *systolic* pressure.

The bottom number is the pressure when your heart rests between beats. It is called the *diastolic* pressure.

**Normal blood pressure** is below 120/80.

**High-normal (prehypertension)** is 120–139/80–89.

**High blood pressure (hypertension)** is

- Stage 1: 140–159/90–99.
- Stage 2: 160/100 or higher.

## Why should you worry about high blood pressure?

If you are in the “high-normal” stage or higher, it means that you have a higher risk of heart attack or stroke than most people.

## Finding it early and controlling it is important.

Over time, high blood pressure damages your arteries. This raises your risk of heart attack, stroke, kidney

damage, vision loss, blood clots in your legs, and sexual impotence. High blood pressure also makes your heart work harder. This can gradually make the heart muscle get weaker and increase the risk of heart failure.

## How do you know if you have high blood pressure?

Usually you do not have any symptoms. The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to get it checked using a blood pressure cuff.

## How often should you get your blood pressure checked?

- You should have your blood pressure checked at least once every two years.
- You should have it checked more often if you are over 50, or have other risks, such as being overweight, diabetic, or African-American.
- It's a good idea to have it checked every time you see your doctor.

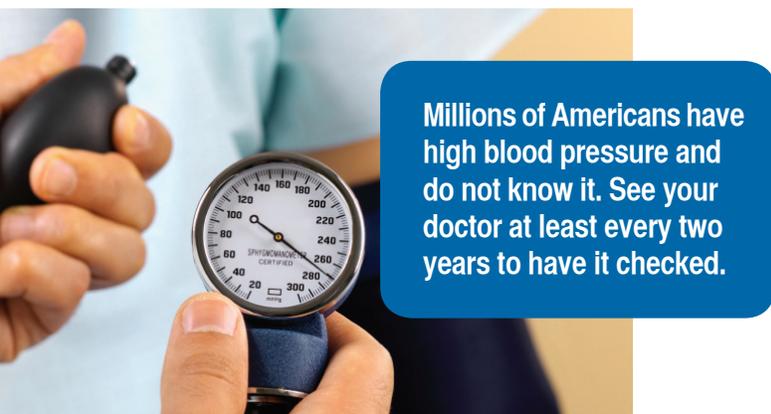
## Our advice:

Have your doctor check your blood pressure regularly. If it is above normal, ask about ways to lower it.

**If your blood pressure is 120–139/80–89:** Focus on the lifestyle changes on the next page: diet, exercise, limiting salt, and weight loss. Usually, you do not need to take a drug unless you also have diabetes, heart disease, or kidney disease.

**If your blood pressure is 140–159/90–99:** You will need to make changes in your diet and exercise and possibly start taking a drug. This is usually a low-dose diuretic, unless you have other health problems, such as diabetes or kidney disease.

**If your blood pressure is 160/100 or higher:** You will need to make changes in your diet and exercise and start on drug treatment. This may include a diuretic and one or more of the following: a beta-blocker, a calcium channel blocker, an ACE inhibitor, or an ARB.



## Control high blood pressure with diet, exercise, and weight loss.

The steps below can help lower your blood pressure by as much as 45 points.

**Adopt the DASH diet.** DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension. The DASH diet includes lots of fruits, vegetables, grains, low-fat dairy products, and foods that are low in saturated fat and total fat, such as fish and beans.

**Eat less salt.** Do not eat more than a teaspoon of sodium (2,400 mg) a day. This includes the salt in packaged foods. Read the Nutrition Facts label. Look for the words “Reduced Sodium” or “Low Sodium” on the package. Put away the saltshaker. Season foods with herbs and spices.

**Limit alcohol.** Men should have no more than two drinks a day. Women should have no more than one. A drink is a bottle of beer (12 ounces), a glass of wine (5 ounces), or one shot (1.5 ounces) of 80-proof liquor.

**Be active.** Try to get at least 30 minutes of brisk activity most days of the week, such as fast walking. Brisk activity, also called aerobic activity, gets your heart beating faster.

**Lose extra weight.** Try to keep your body mass index under 25. To learn more about your body mass index, go to: <http://nhlbisupport.com/bmi/>.

## Control high blood pressure with blood pressure drugs.

If diet and exercise alone do not help enough, then you should consider adding a blood pressure drug. You may need to start a drug right away if your blood pressure is over 140/90 or you have other risks, like diabetes or heart failure.

**Diuretics.** Most people start with a diuretic, especially a thiazide diuretic, such as chlorthalidone or hydrochlorothiazide. Diuretics help your body get rid of extra water and sodium. This helps relax the walls of your arteries. Diuretics are generally safe and effective. You can buy them as low-cost generics. Side effects include frequent urination, low potassium levels, and, for men, problems having an erection.

However, some people cannot take diuretics. And you may also need another drug if a diuretic, alone, does not lower your blood pressure enough.

**Beta-blockers.** You may need a beta-blocker if you also have chest pain (angina), an irregular heart rhythm (arrhythmia), a problem with the heart muscle, heart failure, or you have had a heart attack. Examples include Toprol-XL (metoprolol), Corgard (nadolol), and Inderal (propranolol).

**Calcium-channel blockers.** Calcium-channel blockers can help reduce blood pressure for people who also have chest pain (angina), an irregular heart rhythm (arrhythmia), or migraines. Examples include Norvasc (amlodipine), and Cardizem (diltiazem).

**ACE inhibitors.** An ACE inhibitor may be a good choice if you also have diabetes, heart failure, kidney disease, or you have had a heart attack or a stroke. Examples include Lotensin (benazepril), Prinivil and Zestril (lisinopril), and Vasotec (enalapril).

**ARBs (angiotensin II receptor blockers).** You may need to try an ARB if you have diabetes, heart failure, kidney disease, or you have had a heart attack or a stroke and an ACE inhibitor makes you cough. These include Cozaar (losartan) and Atacand (candesartan). ARBs cost more than other blood pressure drugs, however.

## Be aware of side effects.

- Have your potassium and magnesium levels checked.
- Call your doctor if you have cramps, vomiting, or your heart rate or pulse get fast. This can be a sign of low potassium.
- Watch for signs of gout, such as a swollen big toe or knee.
- If you also have diabetes, watch your insulin level extra carefully because drugs for high blood pressure can cause changes.
- Carefully follow the instructions about how much to take and read the label for possible side effects.

Our analysis is based on scientific reviews by the Oregon Health and Science University-based Drug Effectiveness Review Project and other medical reports, including the seventh report of the Joint National Committee on prevention, detection, evaluation and treatment of high blood pressure. You can find more details about our Best Buy Drugs reports at [www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org](http://www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org).

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