

Your blood pressure

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the pressure of the blood in the arteries as the heart pumps it around the body.

How is blood pressure measured?

Blood pressure is usually measured by wrapping an inflatable pressure bag around the upper arm. The bag is connected to a mercury ('aneroid') or digital pressure-measuring device. The entire instrument is called a 'sphygmomanometer' (sfig-mo-mah-nom-eh-ter).

Blood pressure is recorded as two numbers, for example 120 over 80 (120/80). The higher number indicates the pressure in the arteries as the heart squeezes blood out during each beat. It is called the systolic blood pressure. The lower number indicates the pressure as the heart relaxes before the next beat. It is called the diastolic blood pressure. Blood pressure is measured in millimetres of mercury (mmHg).

It is best to measure blood pressure when you are relaxed and sitting or lying down.

Blood pressure varies

Blood pressure does not stay the same all the time. It is always changing to meet your body's needs.

If a reading is high, your doctor will probably measure your blood pressure again on several occasions to confirm the level. Your doctor may also recommend that you measure your blood pressure at home or have a 24-hour recording with a portable monitoring device, particularly if he or she suspects that coming to the clinic makes your blood pressure rise.

You can read more about measuring your own blood pressure in our information sheet *Self-measurement of blood pressure* (available at www.heartfoundation.org.au/Heart_Information/Heart_Conditions/Blood_Pressure or call our Health Information Service on 1300 36 27 87 for a copy).

What is high blood pressure?

There is no firm rule about what defines high blood pressure. Your risk of heart, stroke and blood vessel disease increases as your blood pressure increases, and for most people, the lower the blood pressure the better. However, the following figures are a useful guide.

- **Normal blood pressure:** generally less than 120/80 mmHg (i.e. systolic blood pressure less than 120 and diastolic blood pressure less than 80 mmHg). This is a guide only.
- **Normal to high blood pressure:** between 120/80 and 140/90 mmHg.
- **High blood pressure:** 140/90 mmHg or higher. If your blood pressure is 180/110 mmHg or higher, you have **very high** blood pressure.

Note: the word 'hypertension' is the medical term for high blood pressure. 'Hypertension' does not mean nervous tension.

Why does blood pressure matter?

If your blood pressure remains high, it can lead to serious problems such as a heart attack, a stroke, heart failure or kidney disease. High blood pressure usually does not give warning signs. You can have high blood pressure and feel perfectly well. The only way to find out if your blood pressure is high is by having it checked regularly by your doctor.

The following factors increase the risks of serious problems associated with high blood pressure:

- smoking
- having high blood cholesterol
- being overweight
- having diabetes.

What can I do if I have high blood pressure?

Your doctor is likely to measure your blood pressure several times on several occasions to confirm the diagnosis of high blood pressure. He or she may recommend that you do a test that measures your blood pressure over a 24-hour period, or that you measure your own blood pressure at home. More information on taking your blood pressure at home is available in our information sheet *Self-measurement of blood pressure* (available at www.heartfoundation.org.au/Heart_Information/Heart_Conditions/Blood_Pressure or call our Health Information Service on 1300 36 27 87 for a copy).



Your lifestyle is very important in helping you to control high blood pressure and its associated risks. Your doctor will probably advise you to:

- be smoke-free (for information on quitting smoking, call the Quitline on 13 QUIT)
- reduce your salt intake
- achieve and maintain a healthy body weight
- limit your alcohol intake to no more than two drinks per day (for men), or one drink per day (for women)
- undertake regular physical activity.

Note: some specific types of exercises should be avoided by people with high blood pressure. These include body presses and lifting heavy weights.

Many people with high blood pressure will need to take medicines for the long-term that help to lower it. It is important that you take any blood pressure medicine exactly as it is prescribed. Don't stop taking it or change the dose without talking to your doctor first.

'Normal' blood pressure (less than 120/80 mmHg)

There are several ways that you can help to keep your blood pressure under control and reduce the risk of heart disease.

- Have your blood pressure checked regularly, as part of an assessment of your overall risk of heart, stroke and blood vessel disease. The higher your risk, the more often that you should have these checks.
- Be smoke-free.
- Limit your alcohol intake.
- Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.
- Be active every day – accumulate 30 minutes or more of moderate physical activity on all or most days of the week. Try walking, cycling or any physical activity that you enjoy.
- Enjoy healthy eating. Choose mainly plant-based foods, such as vegetables, fruits and legumes (dried peas, dried beans and lentils), and grain-based foods (preferably wholegrain), such as bread, pasta, noodles and rice. Consume moderate amounts of lean meats, poultry, fish and reduced fat dairy products, and moderate amounts of polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fat.



Further information

For more information, contact our Health Information Service by calling 1300 36 27 87 (for the cost of a local call) or emailing heartline@heartfoundation.org.au.

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INF-042-C

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