

High blood pressure

Understanding and managing
your blood pressure

Second edition



Key points to remember about high blood pressure

High blood pressure is one of the most common health conditions affecting the heart and blood vessels.

It is one of the main risk factors for heart, stroke, kidney and blood vessel disease.

High blood pressure rarely has warning signs. To find out if you have high blood pressure, you should measure your blood pressure regularly.

Your family history, eating habits, alcohol use, weight and level of physical activity have a strong influence on your blood pressure.

You can help lower your blood pressure by:

- maintaining a healthy body weight
- being physically active every day
- limiting the amount of alcohol you drink
- decreasing your salt (sodium) intake
- increasing the potassium in your diet.

Many people will need to take blood pressure lowering medicine to reduce their high blood pressure. Your general practitioner (GP) can work closely with you to find the medicine that works best for you.

If you smoke, your GP will suggest that you quit smoking as this will reduce your risk of developing problems with your heart and blood vessels.

What is high blood pressure?

Your heart is a muscle that pumps blood into your body's organs and tissues. Blood is pumped out of the left side of your heart into the arteries, the blood vessels that carry the blood's oxygen and nutrients to your body. As the blood pumps out of the heart and into the arteries, it pushes against the artery walls. Blood pressure is the measurement of the pressure of the blood in the artery.

Blood pressure peaks when the heart muscle contracts and pumps blood, a cycle called systole. Blood pressure falls when the heart relaxes and refills with blood, a cycle called diastole.

Your blood pressure will go up and down throughout the day. It depends on the time of day, the amount of fluid in your body, the medicines in your system and what you are doing when your blood pressure is being measured.

High blood pressure (hypertension) is a condition where your blood is consistently higher than normal. Hypertension can cause damage to your blood vessels, heart, brain and other important organs.

High blood pressure is more likely to occur as you get older; one in two people over the age of 65 years old in Australia has high blood pressure.

How do I know if I have high blood pressure?

You need to measure your blood pressure regularly to know if you have high blood pressure. There are often no symptoms to warn you. The serious effects of high blood pressure usually develop only after you have had it for some years.

What is 'normal' blood pressure?

There is no 'normal' or 'ideal' blood pressure reading. It depends on your general health, your heart health and other risk factors such as smoking, being overweight or being older, having diabetes or kidney problems, or having a family history of heart disease. Your GP will work out your ideal blood pressure based on your circumstances.

What causes high blood pressure?

The exact cause of high blood pressure is often not clear. Normally, your blood vessels detect temporary changes in your blood pressure and send messages to your brain to keep the pressure within a healthy range. If your blood pressure stays high for too long, your system adjusts to a higher level.

Your family history, eating habits, alcohol use, weight and level of physical activity have a strong influence on your blood pressure.

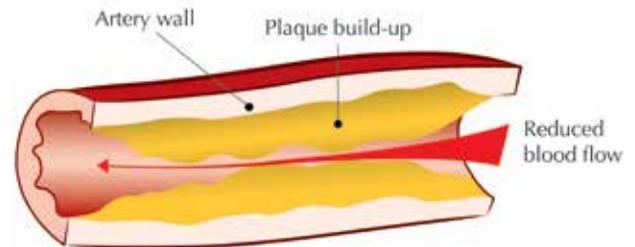
Some medicines – including the oral contraceptive pill, contraceptive injections, steroids (cortisone-like medicines), cough and cold medicines, and arthritis medicines – can raise your blood pressure. Your GP or pharmacist can answer questions about your medicines.

You can speak to a health professional by calling
1300 36 27 87



How does high blood pressure affect my health?

If you don't reduce your high blood pressure, your heart and arteries can become overloaded. High blood pressure can speed up the build-up of plaque on the artery walls (atherosclerosis), clogging blood flow to your heart muscle. Atherosclerosis can cause health problems such as heart attack and stroke.



Artery showing plaque build-up that clogs blood flow

High blood pressure can weaken the walls of arteries in your brain, leading them to burst and causing a stroke.

High blood pressure can also affect arteries to other parts of the body, such as the eyes, kidneys and legs.

The higher your blood pressure, the harder your heart must work to pump blood around the body. If you don't treat your high blood pressure, your heart may weaken because of the extra demand, and it won't be able to do its job. This may cause heart failure, a serious health condition with symptoms such as tiredness, shortness of breath, and swollen feet and ankles.

Quick tip

If you have high blood pressure, your GP can give you a personalised plan to help you to reduce it.

How can I reduce my high blood pressure?

Many people need medicine to manage high blood pressure, but other people can manage it by making some healthy lifestyle changes.

You can help to lower your blood pressure by:

- maintaining a healthy body weight – You can find out if you have a healthy body weight by using the body mass index (BMI) calculator on the Heart Foundation website at www.heartfoundation.org.au/bmi-calculator. You can also check your waist size (circumference) and aim for a target of <94 cm for men, <90 cm for Asian men and <80 cm for women.
- being physically active – You should aim for 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, such as brisk walking, on all or most days of the week.
- limiting the amount of alcohol you drink – Men should not drink more than two standard drinks a day and women should not drink more than one standard drink a day.
- decreasing your salt (sodium) intake – Salt is hidden in processed foods such as bread, meat, poultry (especially processed meat), some cereal products, biscuits and pasta.
- increasing the potassium in your diet – Eat foods such as fruit, vegetables, legumes (chick peas, lentils, baked and kidney beans) and plain unsalted nuts.

Even if you take medicine to manage your blood pressure, it is still important to make changes to your lifestyle to help reduce your blood pressure.

Being a non-smoker reduces your risk of developing problems with your heart and blood vessels. You can call the Quitline on 13 78 48 or go to www.quitnow.gov.au/ for help.



Quick tip

High blood pressure rarely has warning signs. You should ask your GP to check your blood pressure regularly – it's easy and quick to do. We recommend that all adults know their blood pressure level and what it means for their health.

Blood pressure lowering medicine

Many people will need to take blood pressure lowering medicine (antihypertensives) to reduce their high blood pressure to safe levels. There are many blood pressure lowering medicines available to manage high blood pressure.

Blood pressure lowering medicines do not cure high blood pressure, but they help to reduce it. Once you start medicines to reduce your blood pressure, you will probably have to take them for the rest of your life. You may need to change the type and dose over time.

If you need to take medicine, your GP will start you on a small dose and watch its effect. If there is a need, your GP will gradually increase the dose or use other medicines until your blood pressure is well managed. You may need two or more different medicines to manage your blood pressure and minimise side effects. Your GP will make every effort to find the best medicine, or combination of medicines, for you.

You need to take your medicines as directed by your GP to make sure they reduce your blood pressure. You can remember to take your medicines correctly by:

- taking it at the same time every day, such as taking it at meal times
- using a weekly pill box with separate compartments
- marking it on a calendar or putting an alarm on your mobile phone
- asking your friends, family or carer to remind you.

We recommend that you always carry a list of your medicines and their doses with you. Talk to your GP if you have trouble remembering to take your medicine(s). There may be a medicines routine that makes it easier to remember.

Other medicines

- Some medicines and complementary therapies interact with blood pressure lowering medicine. Talk to your GP or health professional before starting other medicines.
- If you buy medicines from a place (such as a supermarket) where you can't speak to a health professional, check the label for information about possible interactions with your blood pressure lowering medicine.

Are there side effects from taking blood pressure lowering medicines?

Blood pressure lowering medicines are effective and their health benefits generally outweigh any side effects.

These medicines may cause side effects in some people, but many people don't have any. If you are worried, talk to your GP about the side effects you think you are experiencing, but don't stop taking your medicines. Your GP can change your medicine and the dose to minimise side effects or stop them.

- If you stop taking your medicine for any reason, ask your GP which dose you should restart as the previous dose might make you light-headed.
- If you experience light-headedness or a dry cough, report this to your GP as soon as possible.
- It is important that you work closely with your doctor to find the medicine that works best for you.

Serious side effects

If you think your medicine is causing a side effect, visit your GP to talk about it.

How can I find out more about my medicine?

Speak to your GP to make sure you understand your medicine(s), including what each one does and the dose you should take. You can ask your pharmacist for a Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) leaflet and they, or a nurse or GP, can answer your questions.

How can I monitor my blood pressure?

It is best to check your blood pressure during a routine visit to your GP, community health centre, hospital or clinic. Your health professional will assess your results in relation to your age, family history and other risk factors, such as whether you smoke or have high cholesterol. They may refer you to a specialist physician or clinic.

Will I need to measure my blood pressure at home?

Measuring your blood pressure at home is a good way to see how your blood pressure changes during the day, from day to day and in response to treatment.

Your GP may recommend that you take regular measurements of your blood pressure at home and take your records with you to the clinic. Your GP may use your home measurements to make decisions about your treatment. If you need to take your blood pressure at home, your GP will tell you what you need to do.

Why does my blood pressure vary?

Blood pressure varies from moment to moment. It is affected by things such as your body position, breathing, emotions, exercise and sleep. Your blood pressure is usually lowest when you are sleeping. It rises when you are excited, stressed or exercising. Temporary rises are natural and your blood pressure returns to normal when we rest.

These constant changes can make it difficult to get a true picture of your blood pressure. To get a more accurate result, your GP may measure your blood pressure several times.

You will get a more accurate blood pressure reading if you are relaxed. If you are anxious, your blood pressure may rise temporarily and you will have inaccurate high readings.

Your GP may ask you to wear a blood pressure monitor for 24 hours (to monitor your blood pressure during day-to-day activity and sleep). This will help your GP get accurate information about your blood pressure.

What happens next?

Your GP will probably tell you to have your blood pressure checked regularly, such as weeks or a few months apart. It's important to keep your appointments and follow instructions because your GP needs to monitor your blood pressure and medicines.

You need to take your medicine as advised. If you think you are having problems with your medicine, tell your GP so they can change your treatment to minimise side effects.

Even when taking medicines, you need to maintain a healthy weight, eat foods that will maintain your heart health, do regular physical activity, limit your alcohol use and avoid smoking.

Want to know more?

For more information, call our Health Information Service on 1300 36 27 87 and talk to one of our trained health professionals. You can also visit www.heartfoundation.org.au



For heart health information,
please contact us

1300 36 27 87

heartfoundation.org.au



If you need an interpreter,
call TIS National on 131 450.

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