



Clinical Risk Factors: Blood Pressure



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Why is this important?

- More than 65 million Americans—**over 1 in 4 adults**—have high blood pressure. Over 25% of those with high blood pressure don't know they have it. Do you?
- The **death** rate from high blood pressure has increased 25% over the past decade.
- High blood pressure (HBP) puts extra **stress on your heart and blood vessels**, and can lead to disease, disability, and even death.
- If you have high blood pressure, you are at **increased risk for heart disease, stroke & other** serious medical problems such as blindness and heart or kidney failure.
- High blood pressure is a factor in up to 3/4 of all heart attacks, strokes and heart failure, and is the single **most important risk factor** for stroke.
- The higher your blood pressure, the higher your risk. And the longer high blood pressure goes untreated, the more serious its **complications**.
- If you have high blood pressure, *plus* high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, or use tobacco, **your risk** of heart attack or stroke increases significantly.
- High blood pressure usually has **no symptoms**—until it begins to damage your organs. That's why it is often called *the silent killer*.
- In up 95% of cases, **the cause** of high blood pressure is not known (*idiopathic*), but it is easy to detect and most cases can be controlled with proper treatment.
- High blood pressure and its complications cost the U.S. economy **over \$65 billion each year**.

(See the [Online Resources](#) section for additional information.)

How to Read Your Blood Pressure

Your heart beats about 60 to 80 times a minute under normal conditions. Your blood pressure rises with each heartbeat, and falls when your heart relaxes between beats. These two measurements are your [blood pressure](#), and are recorded in millimeters of mercury (mmHg, a unit for measuring pressure):



- The first or top number is your [systolic pressure](#), which tells you the force in your arteries when the **heart beats**, pumping blood from your heart to the rest of your body.
- The second or bottom number is your [diastolic pressure](#), which tells you the force in your arteries when your **heart relaxes** between heartbeats.

So, if your blood pressure is 120/80 mmHg (read as “120 over 80”), your systolic blood pressure is 120, and the diastolic reading is 80.

A blood pressure below 120/80 mmHg is considered normal; higher levels can damage your heart and arteries, and increase your risk for heart disease, stroke and kidney problems.

How does this affect me?

Anyone can have high blood pressure (HBP). The good news is HBP can be controlled. And better yet, it can often be prevented!



Age:

- Blood pressure commonly increases with age.
- People over 55 have a 90% chance of developing HBP in their remaining lifetimes.

Sex:

- Men often develop high blood pressure between 35 – 55 years of age.
- Women are more likely to develop it *after* age 55 (after menopause).
- From age 55 on, many more women than men have high blood pressure.

Race & ethnicity:

- In 2007 in Connecticut, high blood pressure affected roughly:
 - 1 in 3 blacks (33.4%);
 - 1 in 3.5 whites (27.5%); and,
 - 1 in 7 Hispanics (14.5%).
- African Americans tend to develop high blood pressure earlier in life, and it tends to be more severe. Black women are especially affected.

Family history:

- Most people with a strong family history of heart disease or stroke have one or more other risk factors. Since you can't change your family history, it is even more important that you treat and control those risk factors you can change.

Other socioeconomic characteristics:

- Nationwide, the rate of HBP generally increases with decreasing income levels.
- The rate of HBP also generally increases with decreasing educational levels.

(See the [Facts & Figures](#) section for additional data.)

Take control!

Complications from high blood pressure can largely be prevented through routine screening, proper treatment, healthy eating, and regular physical activity. If you don't know your blood pressure, or haven't had it checked recently, see your health care professional. If you need medication, be sure to take it as prescribed.



Here are 5 steps you can take to help control your blood pressure:

1. **Healthy weight:** achieve or maintain a healthy weight. Limit portion sizes, especially of high-calorie foods. If you are overweight, losing even 10 – 20 pounds can help.
2. **Healthy diet:** eat a diet rich in fruits & vegetables, and low in saturated fat and cholesterol.
3. **Reduce salt intake:** lower your salt consumption as much as possible—to less than 1 teaspoon a day.* Choose foods that are low in salt; avoid canned, processed & fast foods; and limit the amount of salt you add to your food.
4. **Increase physical activity:** Take more steps! Start slow and stay active. Take the stairs, walk the dog—or try something different. Aim for at least 30 minutes 5 days a week. You'll feel better.
5. **Moderate alcohol consumption:** men should have no more than 2 drinks a day, and women no more than 1 drink a day. Remember: the more you drink, the higher your blood pressure—regardless of age, weight or salt intake!

Bonus step:

Increase your **potassium** intake.*† Eat fruits & vegetables rich in potassium—bananas, for example—and you will benefit from their other nutrients, too.

* Reducing salt and increasing potassium are especially effective strategies for lowering blood pressure among black adults.

† Be sure to check with your doctor if you have a medical condition or are taking any medications that are known to impair potassium excretion.

Know Your Goal!

Have your blood pressure checked regularly. If your blood pressure is normal, get it checked **at least every 2 years**.

If your blood pressure is above normal or you have a family history of high blood pressure, you are at higher risk and should have it checked more often. Be sure to follow your doctor's recommendations.

Normal blood pressure in adults:

- **Systolic:** less than 120 mmHg; AND,
- **Diastolic:** less than 80 mmHg.

Pre-hypertension:

- Systolic: 120 to 139 mmHg; OR,
- Diastolic: 80 to 89 mmHg.

Stage 1 Hypertension:

- Systolic: 140 to 159 mmHg; OR,
- Diastolic: 90 to 99 mmHg.

Stage 2 Hypertension:

- Systolic: 160 mmHg or higher; OR,
- Diastolic: 100 mmHg or higher.



References: Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality; American Heart Association; Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention; Council of State Governments; Lab Tests Online; National Heart, Lung & Blood Institute.

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