



What is blood pressure?

When your heart beats, it pumps blood around your body to give it the energy and oxygen it needs. As the blood moves, it pushes against the sides of the blood vessels. The strength of this pushing is your blood pressure. If your blood pressure is too high, it puts extra strain on your arteries (and your heart) which may lead to heart attacks and Strokes.

How you can tell if you have high blood pressure

Having high blood pressure (hypertension) is not usually something that you feel or notice. It does not tend to produce obvious signs or symptoms. The only way to know what your blood pressure is, is to have it measured.

Blood pressure is measured in 'millimetres of mercury' (mmHg) and is written as two numbers. For example, if your reading is 120/80mmHg, your blood pressure is '120 over 80'.

What do the numbers mean?

Every blood pressure reading consists of two numbers or levels. They are shown as one number on top of the other.

The first (or top) number is your **systolic** blood pressure. It is the highest level your blood pressure reaches when your heart beats.

The second (or bottom) number is your **diastolic** blood pressure. It is the lowest level your blood pressure reaches as your heart relaxes or rests between beats.

What is normal blood pressure?

Ideally, we should all have a blood pressure below 120 over 80 (120/80). This is the ideal blood pressure for people wishing to have good health. At this level, we have a much lower risk of heart disease or Stroke.

If your blood pressure is optimal, this is great news.

If your blood pressure is above 120/80mmHg, you will need to lower it.

Most adults have blood pressure readings in the range from 120 over 80 (120/80) to 140 over 90 (140/90). If your blood pressure is within this range, you should be taking steps to bring it down or to stop it rising any further.

The reason why people with blood pressure readings in this range should lower it, even though this is not classified as 'high' blood pressure, is that the higher your blood pressure, the higher your risk of health problems. For example, someone with a blood pressure level of 135 over 85 (135/85) is twice as likely to have a heart attack or Stroke than someone with a reading of 115 over 75 (115/75).

What is high blood pressure?

You probably have high blood pressure (hypertension) if your blood pressure readings are consistently 140 over 90, or higher, over a number of weeks.

You may also have high blood pressure if just one of the numbers is higher than it should be over a number of weeks.

If you have high blood pressure, the additional pressure puts extra strain on your heart and blood vessels. Over time, this extra strain increases your risk of a **heart attack** or **Stroke**.

High blood pressure can also cause heart and kidney disease and is closely linked to some forms of dementia.

PLEASE TURN OVER





Monitoring blood pressure

What are the signs and symptoms of high blood pressure?

High blood pressure usually has no signs or symptoms, so the only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to have your blood pressure measured. However, a single high reading does not necessarily mean you have high blood pressure. Many things can affect your blood pressure throughout the day, so your doctor will take a number of blood pressure readings to see if it stays high over time.

Occasionally, people with very high blood pressure say they experience headaches, but it is best to visit your GP if you are concerned about symptoms.

What causes high blood pressure?

For most people, there may be no single cause for their high blood pressure. We do not know exactly what causes high blood pressure. We do know that your lifestyle can affect your risk of developing it. You are at a higher risk if:

- you eat too much salt;
- you don't eat enough fruit and vegetables;
- you are not active enough;
- you are overweight; or
- you drink too much alcohol.

You can lower your blood pressure - and your risk of Stroke and heart attack - by making lifestyle changes.

Additional causes of high blood pressure

There are some factors that increase your risk of developing high blood pressure, which you cannot control. These include:

- **Age:** as you get older, the effects of an unhealthy lifestyle can build up and your blood pressure can increase.
- **Ethnic origin:** people from African-Caribbean and South Asian communities are at greater risk than other people of high blood pressure.
- **Family history:** you are at greater risk if other members of your family have, or have had, high blood pressure.

Some people may have high blood pressure that is linked to another medical condition, such as kidney problems. For these people, treating the medical problem may lower their blood pressure back to normal.

It is essential to visit your GP regularly to have your blood pressure checked.

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