

High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure or *hypertension* currently affects 1 out of every 3 American adults. High blood pressure often has no signs or symptoms and is therefore called the “**silent killer**” as it is one of the most important factors leading to heart attacks, strokes, heart failure, kidney disease and early death.

Blood pressure changes constantly throughout the day to respond to what you are doing, thinking and feeling. Blood pressure readings in a doctor’s office are a snap shot of the overall pressure. Some people have higher readings in the office than at home, a condition called “white coat hypertension”. Measuring blood pressure at home at various times of the day gives the most accurate idea of your true blood pressure. Relatively inexpensive home blood pressure monitors are available at most pharmacies. The pressure should be measured in a sitting position with your elbow supported at the heart level. You should sit quietly for 5 minutes before testing the pressure and take it twice with a brief break in between.

Two numbers are recorded with blood pressure readings. The top number is called the **systolic pressure** reflecting the amount of pressure generated when the heart is contracting. The bottom number is the **diastolic pressure** that reflects the pressure when the heart is relaxing between beats. The latest national guidelines for blood pressure are as follows:

	Systolic	Diastolic
Normal	<120	<80
Pre-hypertension	120-139	80-89
Stage 1 Hypertension	140-159	90-99
Stage 2 Hypertension	>160	100

Making healthful lifestyle changes can control or improve blood pressure. Here are **10 steps** that can help to lower your blood pressure:

- 1) Monitor blood pressure at home. This will result in the most accurate assessment of your blood pressure.
- 2) Regular exercise improves blood vessel flexibility and heart function. It can be as simple as walking regularly and may decrease blood pressure by 10 points.
- 3) Eat well. The American Heart Association recommends the ‘Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension’ (DASH) diet. This diet emphasizes fruits and vegetables, low fat dairy products, whole grains, fish, poultry and nuts.
- 4) Lose weight, if overweight. Losing even 10% of your current weight can make a big difference.
- 5) Discontinue smoking. Nicotine constricts blood vessels and can cause a 20-point increase in blood pressure.
- 6) Drink alcohol in moderation. One drink a day for women may be good for the heart and blood vessels.
- 7) Limit salt intake. Too much sodium and too little potassium can increase blood pressure in people who are sensitive to salt. Aim for less the 1.5 grams of sodium and more than 4.7 grams of potassium daily. Many salt substitutes contain potassium.
- 8) Sleep at least 6-8 hours a night. Chronic sleep deprivation can contribute to high blood pressure and increased chance of developing heart disease.
- 9) Reduce stress. Mental and emotional stress can increase blood pressure while meditation, deep breathing and other stress-reducing activities can lower it.
- 10) Take prescribed blood pressure medication. Taking blood pressure pills should not make you feel differently and can keep you from having a stroke or heart attack.