

High Blood Pressure: Keeping It in Check

What is high blood pressure?

Imagine that your arteries are pipes that carry blood from your heart to the rest of your body. High blood pressure (also called hypertension) occurs when your blood moves through your arteries at a higher pressure than normal. This can damage your blood vessels, raising your risk of stroke, kidney failure, heart disease and heart attack. High blood pressure usually has no symptoms.

High blood pressure that can be linked to a specific cause, such as a disease or drug, is called secondary hypertension. Often, however, the exact cause isn't known. When the cause isn't known, the high blood pressure is called primary or essential hypertension.

What changes do I need to make?

Treating your high blood pressure begins with making changes in your lifestyle. These things alone may work. If these changes don't work, you may also need to take medicine.

- Be physically active.
- Lose weight if you're overweight.
- Follow DASH eating plan.
- Limit how much sodium you eat.
- Limit how much alcohol you drink.
- Don't smoke or use any tobacco product.

Do I need to quit drinking alcohol altogether?

In some people, alcohol causes the blood pressure to rise quite a lot. In other people, it doesn't. If you drink alcohol, limit it to no more than two drinks per day for men or 1 drink per day for women. One drink is a can of beer (12 ounces), a 4-ounce glass of wine or one jigger (1 ounce) of liquor. If your blood pressure increases with alcohol, it's best not to drink any alcohol.

Why exercise?

Exercise helps lower blood pressure and helps make the heart strong. It is also the best way to lose weight and keep it off. A good goal is to exercise for at least 30 to 60 minutes four to six times a week, but any exercise is better than none or count your steps with a goal of reaching 10,000 steps per day, most days.

What changes do I need to make in my diet?

Follow the DASH eating plan which is rich in fruits, vegetables, grains, skim dairy products, nuts and seeds. Ask for a session with a registered dietitian to show you how. Limit your salt intake.

How do tobacco products affect blood pressure?

The nicotine in cigarettes and other tobacco products causes your blood vessels to constrict, which raises your blood pressure. If you quit smoking or using other tobacco products, you can significantly lower your risk of heart disease and heart attack.

Does stress affect my blood pressure?

Stress may affect blood pressure. To help combat the effects of stress, try relaxation techniques or biofeedback. These things work best when used at least once a day. Ask your family doctor for advice.

What about medicine?

If diet and exercise alone don't control your blood pressure, your doctor will probably recommend medicine. Many different types of medicines can be used to treat high blood pressure, such as diuretics, beta blockers, alpha blockers, angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors and calcium channel blockers. These are called antihypertensive medicines. Within each group of medicines, there are many different brand names.

The goal of treatment is to control your blood pressure with medicine that's easy to take and doesn't have side effects. This goal can almost always be met. It may take more than one medicine.

If your blood pressure can only be controlled with medicine, you'll need to take it for the rest of your life. Don't stop taking the medicine without talking with your family doctor. If you do, you raise your risk of having a stroke or heart attack.

Talk to your family doctor about any changes or side effects you notice while taking the medicine. If one medicine doesn't work for you or causes side effects, you have other options.