



High Blood Pressure & Your Health: Managing the Silent Killer

High blood pressure, or **hypertension**, is a dangerous condition that affects approximately 30 percent of Americans, causing up to 60,000 deaths per year. High blood pressure is often called “the silent killer” because it typically has no symptoms until after it has done significant damage to the **heart** and **arteries**. In fact, almost 20 percent of Americans who have high blood pressure don’t know they have it and, therefore, don’t know that they are at risk for **heart attack**, **stroke**, **heart failure**, **kidney disease**, and eye disease.

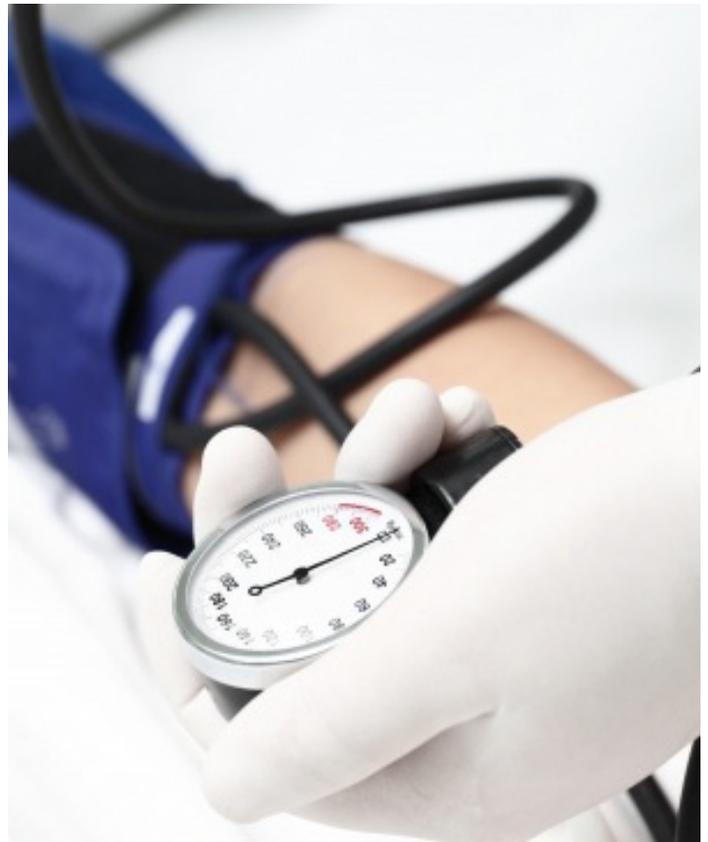
Read on to learn more about high blood pressure, including information on screening and treatment.

What Is High Blood Pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the inside of the arteries as the heart pumps the blood through your body. Blood pressure readings are recorded with two numbers, listed as a ratio, with one number over another number. The top number, or **systolic pressure**, is the force of blood when your heart beats, and the bottom number, or **diastolic pressure**, is the force of your blood against the artery walls when your heart rests.

- A **normal blood pressure reading** is under 120/80 millimeters of mercury (mmHg).
- **Prehypertension** refers to blood pressure that is raised enough to be a warning sign for developing hypertension. Prehypertension is anything above normal up to 139/89 mmHg.
- **Hypertension** is 140/90 mmHg and above.

Treatment is recommended if your blood pressure is 120/80 mmHg and above. In most cases, treatment includes lifestyle changes and/or medications.



Why Is High Blood Pressure a Silent Killer?

High blood pressure typically has no symptoms, but it causes progressive harm to the cardiovascular system. When blood pushes with too much force through the cardiovascular system, it can damage the walls of the arteries as well as the heart muscle. Damage to the arteries that supply the heart muscle with blood can eventually contribute to a heart attack. Similarly, damage to the arteries that supply the brain with blood can contribute to a stroke, and damage to the arteries that provide the kidneys with blood can lead to kidney disease.



How Will I Know if I Have High Blood Pressure?

The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to test for it. Your healthcare provider will not diagnose you with high blood pressure based on one reading. Typically three elevated readings are needed to confirm the diagnosis. This is one reason you may be asked to use a blood pressure cuff at home or a machine at a pharmacy and keep a log of your blood pressure readings over several days.



How Can I Work with My Healthcare Provider to Manage My Blood Pressure?

If you are diagnosed with high blood pressure, your healthcare provider can help you bring your blood pressure under control and reduce damage to your cardiovascular system. Treatment usually consists of a combination of the following:

- **Monitoring.** You will need to have your blood pressure tested periodically to make sure that treatment is keeping it in a healthy range.
- **Lifestyle changes.** Exercise, weight loss, salt reduction, quitting smoking, and stress reduction all can help lower blood pressure. Your healthcare provider can refer you to resources that can support your efforts to make lifestyle changes.
- **Medications.** Your physician may prescribe medications, such as diuretics and beta blockers. The medications work in various ways to reduce the pressure of blood against artery walls and the workload of the heart.

- **Interventional procedures.** While not yet approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), an innovative procedure called **renal denervation** is being tested for its ability to safely lower blood pressure when lifestyle changes and medications don't work.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor About Your Blood Pressure

- Is my blood pressure **too high**?
- If I have borderline high blood pressure, what can we do to **prevent or slow** its progression to hypertension?
- What can we do to **manage** my high blood pressure?
- Should I be **monitoring** my blood pressure at home?
- Should I be taking **medication** to treat my high blood pressure?
- What **lifestyle changes** may help lower my blood pressure?
- What are my options if I have hypertension that is **resistant to treatment**?
- How **often should I see you** to make sure my blood pressure is in a healthy range?

What Should I Do If I Have Other Questions?

Ask them. Contact your healthcare provider and ask all of your questions. Any time you have health questions, the conversations you have with your doctor are the key to successful results. Ask every question you have.

We hope you will use SecondsCount.org to learn more about your cardiovascular health and treatment options. SecondsCount.org was developed by the Society for Cardiovascular Angiography and Interventions (SCAI), the medical society for interventional cardiologists.