Imagine for a minute that you’re sitting in a crowded football stadium. There are thousands of people all around you. Would you ever guess that 1 in 3 of them have high blood pressure? Could you tell who they are just by looking at them? Do you even know your own blood pressure number and what it means?

The fact is that many people don’t know they have high blood pressure because they typically have no symptoms until vital organs like the heart, kidneys and eyes may become damaged. If you know your blood pressure number and it’s where it should be, great job! Keep monitoring it at each medical checkup, or as often as your doctor recommends. High blood pressure can almost always be prevented. Once high blood pressure develops, it usually lasts a lifetime. If you have high blood pressure, you’ll need to treat and control it for life.

WHAT CAUSES HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

Anyone can develop high blood pressure at any time. Typically, the highest risk factors include:

- Age and gender (men over 45 and women over 65 are at increased risk)
- Race and ethnicity (especially if you are African-American)
- Family history
- Obesity
- Sleep apnea
- Smoking
- Sodium intake (eating too much salt)
- Potassium intake (not getting enough)
- Alcohol
- Physical inactivity
- Stress

WHAT DOES YOUR NUMBER MEAN?

Your heart is a strong pumping muscle that processes about 2,000 gallons of blood through your body each day. That’s a big job! As your heart pumps blood, it puts pressure on the walls of arteries. Your blood pressure naturally rises and falls during the day. But when it stays high over time, it is called high blood pressure – or hypertension. It’s dangerous because it makes the heart work too hard. It can cause your arteries to get clogged and narrow (called atherosclerosis), and it can also lead to heart failure, stroke, kidney disease and blindness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Blood Pressure Level (MmHg)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Systolic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>&lt;120</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-hypertension</td>
<td>120 – 139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>140 or higher</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
What Can You Do About It?

If you have high blood pressure, don’t despair. Keeping blood pressure down is often a matter of lifestyle. If your doctor prescribes medication for you, take it as advised. In addition, the NHLBI offers these six steps to blood pressure control:

1. **Reduce Salt (Sodium) Intake.** People with healthy blood pressure levels should consume no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium a day. That’s about a teaspoon of salt. If your blood pressure is high, your doctor may recommend no more than 1,500 milligrams a day.

2. **Follow a Healthy Eating Plan.** The NHLBI’s Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) study found that a low-salt low-fat diet filled with fruits, vegetables, and whole grains effectively controls blood pressure.

3. **Maintain a Healthy Weight.** If you’re overweight and have high blood pressure, losing just 10 pounds can make a difference.

4. **Be Physically Active** for at least 30 minutes a day.

5. **Limit Alcohol** to no more than one or two drinks a day.

6. **Quit Smoking.** Smoking injures blood vessels. That’s especially bad for those with high blood pressure. Quitting smoking and avoiding secondhand smoke can help reverse heart and blood vessel damage and reduce heart disease risk right away.

The Take Charge! Live Well! Program Can Help with High Blood Pressure.

Remember that you have access to health coaching that can offer support if you’re living with high blood pressure. Coaching is free and confidential. You’ll get personalized support from a health coach who can help you understand your condition and help you take action to improve it.


Take Charge! Live Well!

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