**High Blood Pressure (Hypertension)**

**Definition**

High blood pressure is a common condition in which the force of the blood against your artery walls is high enough that it may eventually cause health problems, such as heart disease.

Blood pressure is determined by the amount of blood your heart pumps and the amount of resistance to blood flow in your arteries. The more blood your heart pumps and the narrower your arteries, the higher your blood pressure.

You can have high blood pressure (hypertension) for years without any symptoms. Uncontrolled high blood pressure increases your risk of serious health problems, including heart attack and stroke.

High blood pressure typically develops over many years, and it affects nearly everyone eventually. Fortunately, high blood pressure can be easily detected. And once you know you have high blood pressure, you can work with your doctor to control it.

**Symptoms**

Most people with high blood pressure have no signs or symptoms, even if blood pressure readings reach dangerously high levels.

Although a few people with early-stage high blood pressure may have dull headaches, dizzy spells or a few more nosebleeds than normal, these signs and symptoms typically don't occur until high blood pressure has reached a severe — even life-threatening — stage.

**When to see a doctor**

You'll likely have your blood pressure taken as part of a routine doctor's appointment.

Ask your doctor for a blood pressure reading at least every two years starting at age 18. He or she will likely recommend more frequent readings if you've already been diagnosed with high blood pressure or other risk factors for cardiovascular disease. Children age 3 and older will usually have their blood pressure measured as a part of their yearly checkups.

If you don't regularly see your doctor, you may be able to get a free blood pressure screening at a health resource fair or other locations in your community. You can also find machines in some stores that will measure your blood pressure for free, but these machines can give you inaccurate results.

**Risk factors**

High blood pressure has many risk factors, including:

* **Age.** The risk of high blood pressure increases as you age. Through early middle age, high blood pressure is more common in men. Women are more likely to develop high blood pressure after menopause.
* **Race.** High blood pressure is particularly common among blacks, often developing at an earlier age than it does in whites. Serious complications, such as stroke and heart attack, also are more common in blacks.
* **Family history.** High blood pressure tends to run in families.
* **Being overweight or obese.** The more you weigh, the more blood you need to supply oxygen and nutrients to your tissues. As the volume of blood circulated through your blood vessels increases, so does the pressure on your artery walls.
* **Not being physically active.** People who are inactive tend to have higher heart rates. The higher your heart rate, the harder your heart must work with each contraction — and the stronger the force on your arteries. Lack of physical activity also increases the risk of being overweight.
* **Using tobacco.** Not only does smoking or chewing tobacco immediately raise your blood pressure temporarily, but the chemicals in tobacco can damage the lining of your artery walls. This can cause your arteries to narrow, increasing your blood pressure. Secondhand smoke also can increase your blood pressure.
* **Too much salt (sodium) in your diet.** Too much sodium in your diet can cause your body to retain fluid, which increases blood pressure.
* **Too little potassium in your diet.** Potassium helps balance the amount of sodium in your cells. If you don't get enough potassium in your diet or retain enough potassium, you may accumulate too much sodium in your blood.
* **Too little vitamin D in your diet.** It's uncertain if having too little vitamin D in your diet can lead to high blood pressure. Vitamin D may affect an enzyme produced by your kidneys that affects your blood pressure.
* **Drinking too much alcohol.** Over time, heavy drinking can damage your heart. Having more than two drinks a day can raise your blood pressure.
* **Stress.** High levels of stress can lead to a temporary, but dramatic, increase in blood pressure. If you try to relax by eating more, using tobacco or drinking alcohol, you may only increase problems with high blood pressure.
* **Certain chronic conditions.** Certain chronic conditions also may increase your risk of high blood pressure, including high cholesterol, diabetes, kidney disease and sleep apnea.

Sometimes pregnancy contributes to high blood pressure, as well.

Although high blood pressure is most common in adults, children may be at risk, too. For some children, high blood pressure is caused by problems with the kidneys or heart. But for a growing number of kids, poor lifestyle habits — such as an unhealthy diet and lack of exercise — contribute to high blood pressure.