

High Blood Pressure: Essential Hypertension



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BLOOD PRESSURE

Key Points

- Blood pressure is the force of blood against artery walls as the heart pumps blood through the body.
- Most people with high blood pressure have no symptoms.
- If your blood pressure is too high, your healthcare provider may advise that you lose excess weight, use less salt in your food, be physically active, or take medicine.
- If you have low blood pressure that is causing symptoms, do not skip meals, drink plenty of liquids, and stand up slowly after laying down.

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood against artery walls as the heart pumps blood through the body. Many people can improve their blood pressure or prevent high blood pressure with diet changes, more activity, and weight loss if needed. Even if you have a strong family history of high blood pressure, you can improve your blood pressure with a healthy lifestyle.

Blood pressure can go up briefly with exercise, stress, pain, or strong emotions. Drinking alcohol or using some illegal drugs, like cocaine, can also raise blood pressure.

Blood pressure normally goes down when you are resting, sleeping, or feeling calm and relaxed. It can also go down if you are dehydrated and are not drinking enough liquids, such as if you are working or exercising in the hot sun.

How is blood pressure measured?

Most people with high blood pressure have no symptoms. The only way to find out if your blood pressure is normal, too high, or too low is to have it measured. Your healthcare provider measures blood pressure using an inflatable cuff around your upper arm and either a stethoscope or a machine that shows the result.

- Normal resting blood pressure ranges up to 120/80 (“120 over 80”).
- Borderline high blood pressure is 120/80 or higher but less than 140/90.
- High blood pressure is 140/90 or higher for most people. If you have chronic kidney disease, 130/80 or higher is considered high blood pressure.

Why is high blood pressure a problem?

Over time, if your blood pressure rises and stays high, it can damage your blood vessels, heart, brain, kidneys, and eyes even though you may have no symptoms. The higher your blood pressure is, the more it increases your risk of heart attack, stroke, and other serious medical problems.

If you have high blood pressure, lowering it and keeping it normal can help prevent a heart attack or stroke. Keeping your blood pressure under control can help prevent long-term health problems as well, such as heart failure, kidney failure, and blindness.


How can I keep my blood pressure at the right level?

If your blood pressure is too high, your provider may recommend lifestyle changes to help you lower your blood pressure, such as:

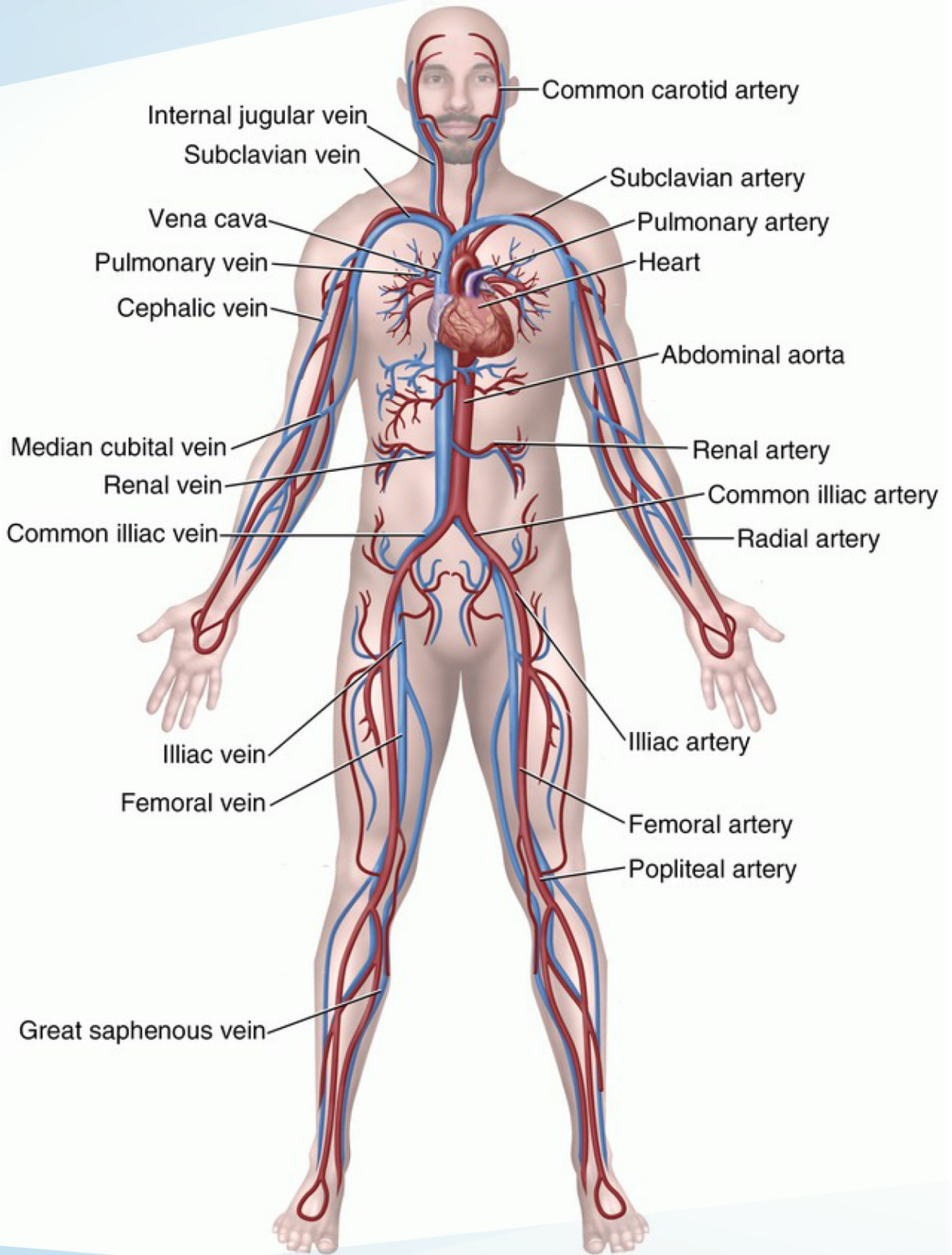
- Lose excess weight. If you are overweight, losing even 10 pounds can lower your blood pressure.
- Use less salt (sodium) in your food. Check the levels of sodium listed on food labels. Most of the sodium you eat may be hidden in processed foods such as chips, crackers, canned or boxed foods, fast food, or restaurant food.
- Follow a healthy eating plan that is low in saturated fat, cholesterol, and processed foods. Include lots of fruits, vegetables, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products. Eat only enough calories to reach or keep a healthy weight. Ask your healthcare provider about how many calories you should eat each day.
- Be physically active. Your provider can give you a physical activity plan that tells you what kind of activity and how much is safe for you.
- Find ways to relax and to manage stress.
- If you smoke, try to quit. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit smoking. Smoking with high blood pressure raises the risk of heart attack and stroke.
- If you want to drink alcohol, ask your healthcare provider how much is safe for you to drink.
- Be careful with nonprescription medicines or herbal supplements. Some can raise blood pressure. This includes diet pills, cold and pain medicines, and energy drinks. Read labels or ask your pharmacist if the medicine or supplement affects blood pressure.
- If lifestyle changes don't lower your blood pressure enough, your healthcare provider may prescribe one or more types of blood pressure medicine. Always follow your healthcare provider's instructions for taking medicine. Don't take more or less medicine or stop taking a medicine without talking to your provider first. It can be dangerous to stop taking certain blood pressure medicines suddenly.

If your blood pressure is normal, check it at least once a year. Your provider may recommend checking your blood pressure at home between checkups.

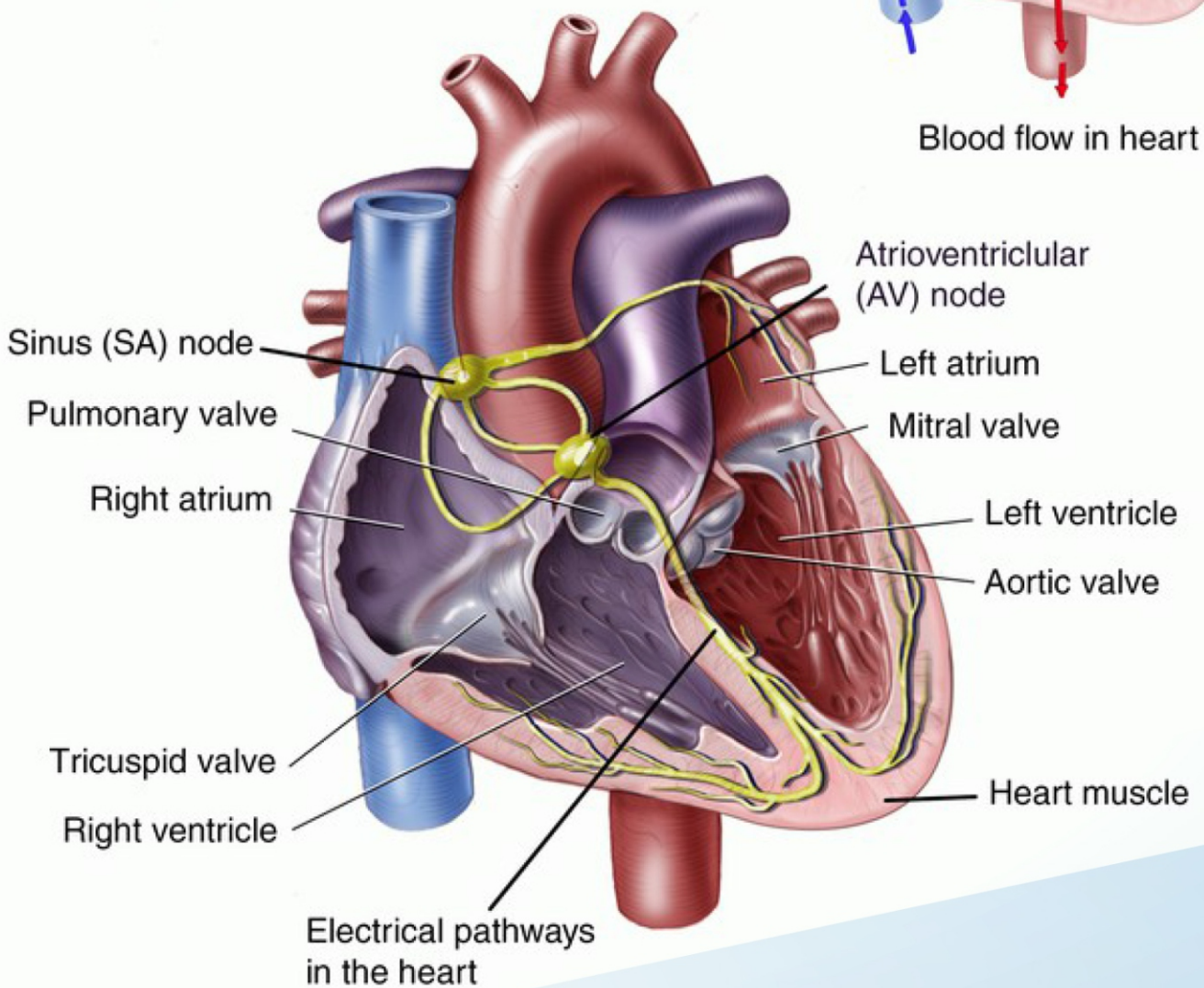
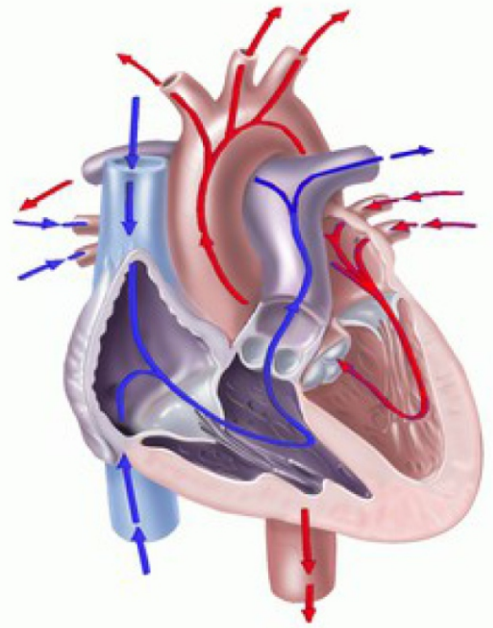
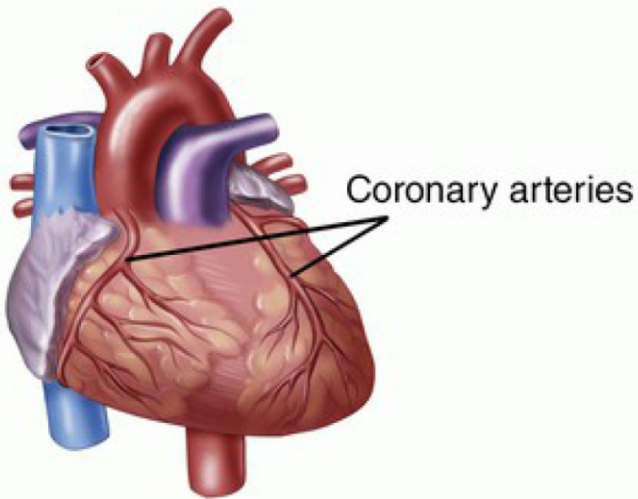
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Circulatory System



The Human Heart



HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE: ESSENTIAL HYPERTENSION

Key Points

- High blood pressure means that your blood pressure is higher than normal. It is called essential hypertension when no cause for it can be found.
- Weight loss, changes in your diet, and exercise may be the only treatment you need. If lifestyle changes don't lower your blood pressure enough, your healthcare provider may prescribe medicine. Many people need to take 2 or more medicines to bring their blood pressure down to a healthy level.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about your personal and family medical history and your lifestyle habits. This will help you know what you can do to lower your risk for high blood pressure.

What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood against artery walls as the heart pumps blood through the body. You may be told that you have high blood pressure (hypertension) if your blood pressure is higher than normal. Hypertension is called essential when no cause for it can be found. When the cause of hypertension is known, such as from kidney disease or a tumor, it is called secondary hypertension.

Blood pressure can rise and fall with exercise, rest, or emotions.

- Normal resting blood pressure ranges up to 120/80 ("120 over 80"). The first number (120 in this example) is the pressure when the heart beats and pushes blood out to the rest of the body. The second number (80 in this example) is the pressure when the heart rests between beats.
- Blood pressure is borderline high if it is 120/80 or higher but less than 140/90.
- High blood pressure is 140/90 or higher for most people. If you have chronic kidney disease, 130/80 or higher is considered high blood pressure.

Why is high blood pressure a problem?

High blood pressure is a problem in many ways.

- Your heart has to work harder to pump blood through your body. The added workload on the heart causes thickening of the heart muscle. Over time, the thickening damages the heart muscle so that it can no longer pump normally. This can lead to a disease called heart failure.
- The higher pressure in your arteries may cause them to weaken and bleed, resulting in a stroke.
- As you get older, blood vessels may become hardened. High blood pressure speeds up this process. Hardened or narrowed arteries may not be able to supply enough blood to all parts of your body.
- High blood pressure may lead to atherosclerosis, which is when deposits of cholesterol, fatty substances, and blood cells clog up an artery. Atherosclerosis is the leading cause of heart attacks. It can also cause strokes.
- Your kidneys, brain, and eyes may be damaged.

You may need treatment for high blood pressure for the rest of your life. However, proper treatment can control your blood pressure and help prevent heart disease, heart attack, or stroke. It can also help prevent long-term health problems, such as heart failure, kidney failure, blindness, and dementia.

If you already have some complications, such as breathing problems or chest pain, lowering your blood pressure may make these problems less severe.

What is the cause?

There are no clear causes of essential hypertension. However, many things can increase blood pressure, such as:

- Being overweight
- Smoking
- Eating a diet high in salt
- Drinking a lot of alcohol

Other important factors include:

- Race. African Americans are more likely to have high blood pressure.
- Gender. Males have a greater chance of developing high blood pressure than women until age 55. After the age of 75, women are more likely to develop high blood pressure than men.
- Heredity. If you have parents with high blood pressure, you are more at risk.
- Age. The older you get, the more likely you are to have high blood pressure.

Also, some medicines increase blood pressure.

Stress and drinking caffeine can make blood pressure go up temporarily, but it's not clear that they have any long-term effects on blood pressure.

What are the symptoms?

You may have high blood pressure for a long time without symptoms. You may not be able to tell by the way you feel that your blood pressure is high. The only way to find out if your blood pressure is high is to have it measured. That's why it's important to have your blood pressure checked at least once a year.

When high blood pressure does cause symptoms, they may include:

- Headaches
- Nosebleeds
- Getting tired easily
- Blurred vision
- Dizziness
- Lightheadedness

- Feeling like your heart is racing or fluttering
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Memory problems
- Daytime sleepiness

How is it diagnosed?

Blood pressure is checked at most healthcare visits. High blood pressure is usually discovered during one of these visits. If your blood pressure is high, you will be asked to return for follow-up checks. Your healthcare provider will ask about your personal and family medical history and examine you.

Tests to look for a possible cause of high blood pressure may include:

- Urine and blood tests
- Chest X-ray
- Electrocardiogram (ECG), which measures and records your heartbeat

You may be asked to use a portable blood-pressure measuring device, which will take your pressure at different times during day and night.

How is it treated?

If your blood pressure is borderline high, you may be able to bring it down to a normal level without medicine. Weight loss, changes in your diet, and exercise may be the only treatment you need.

If lifestyle changes don't lower your blood pressure enough, your healthcare provider may prescribe medicine. Many people need to take 2 or more medicines to bring their blood pressure down to a healthy level. It may take several weeks or months to find the best treatment for you.

How can I take care of myself?

If you have high blood pressure, there are things you can do now to take care of yourself and to prevent problems in the future:

- Follow your treatment plan and know how to take your medicines.
 - Work with your healthcare provider to find what lifestyle changes and medicines are right for you.
 - Follow the directions that come with your medicine, including information about food or alcohol. Make sure you know how and when to take your medicine. Do not take more or less than you are supposed to take.
 - Many medicines have side effects. A side effect is a symptom or problem that is caused by the medicine. Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist what side effects your medicine may cause and what you should do if you have side effects. Ask if you should avoid some nonprescription medicines.

- Be careful with nonprescription medicines or herbal supplements. Some can raise blood pressure. This includes diet pills, cold and pain medicines, and energy boosters. Read labels or ask your pharmacist if the medicine or supplement affects blood pressure. Some illegal drugs, like cocaine, can also affect blood pressure.
- Check your blood pressure (or have it checked) as often as your provider advises. Keep a diary of the readings. A diary is also a good place to note your exercise, weight, salt intake, types of food you are eating, and your feelings. This can help you learn how these things can affect your blood pressure. Take your diary with you when you visit your provider. It may help you and your provider manage your blood pressure and adjust your medicines if needed.
- Don't smoke.
- Eat a healthy diet that is low in salt, saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol. Include lots of fruits, vegetables, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products.
- Get regular exercise, according to your healthcare provider's advice. For example, you might walk, bike, or swim at least 30 minutes 3 to 5 times a week.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Moderate drinking is up to 1 drink a day for women and up to 2 drinks for men.
- Lose weight if you need to.
- Try to reduce the stress in your life or learn how to deal better with situations that make you feel anxious.
- Ask your healthcare provider:
 - How and when you will get your test results
 - How long it will take to recover
 - If there are activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
 - How to take care of yourself at home
 - What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them
- Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup. Keep all appointments for provider visits or tests.

How can I help prevent high blood pressure?

You can help prevent this disease with a heart-healthy lifestyle:

- Eat a healthy diet and keep a healthy weight.
- Stay fit with the right kind of exercise for you.
- Decrease stress.
- Don't smoke.
- Limit your use of alcohol.

Talk to your healthcare provider about your personal and family medical history and your lifestyle habits. This will help you know what you can do to lower your risk for high blood pressure.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.



