

You probably have your blood pressure measured every time you see your doctor. But do you really know what the numbers mean and how they relate to your health? Did you know that high blood pressure can lead to certain health conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease? The information below explains the steps you can take to keep your blood pressure in a safe and healthy range.

What is blood pressure?

“Blood pressure” refers to the force of blood against the artery walls. When your blood pressure is measured, the result is two numbers: the top number, the systolic pressure, is the pressure that occurs when your heart contracts. The bottom number, the diastolic pressure, is the pressure when the heart is at rest. A blood pressure reading is written like this: 122/76.

What is high blood pressure?

High blood pressure, also called hypertension, is a blood pressure of 140/90 or higher for people without diabetes, and 130/80 or higher for people with diabetes. However, recent studies show that lower values can help protect against the problems linked to high blood pressure. People with diabetes are more likely to have high blood pressure than other people. High levels of glucose in the blood can damage blood vessels, making them thicker and less elastic. Blood has a harder time passing through the vessels, causing blood pressure to go up.

If not treated, high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart attack, and kidney and eye disease. Since you usually can't feel high blood pressure, it is important to have your blood pressure checked regularly, or at each visit with your healthcare provider.

What should your blood pressure be?

- If you have diabetes, aim to keep your blood pressure below 130/80.
- People with kidney problems may need to aim for an even lower blood pressure, such as 125/75.
- Ask your healthcare provider what your blood pressure goal should be. Both numbers should be in your goal range.
- Find out what your blood pressure is at every visit with your provider.

What can you do to lower my blood pressure if it's too high?

If your blood pressure is not where it should be, there's a lot you can do to get it into a healthier range. You're probably doing some of these things already!

- **Be at a healthy weight for you.** If you're overweight, losing even five to ten pounds can help lower your blood pressure. To lose weight:
 - Eat smaller portions of food.
 - Choose foods lower in fat and higher in fiber.
 - Be physically active most days of the week.

- **Eat less sodium and fewer salty foods.** Sodium can raise blood pressure. *To cut back on sodium:*
 - Remove the saltshaker from the table and cook without salt.
 - Limit packaged and canned foods with added salt.
 - Keep your sodium intake to no more than 2300 milligrams per day.
 - Eat more fruits and vegetables.
- **Be physically active.** Regular activity can help lower blood pressure and help you lose weight. Check with your doctor before starting an activity program. *To be more active:*
 - Choose an activity that you enjoy and will stay with. Good choices are walking, bicycling, dancing and doing yard work.
 - Start slowly and increase gradually to avoid injury.
 - Aim to be active 30 to 45 minutes, 4 to 6 days of the week.
- **Stop smoking!** Smoking can raise blood pressure and can increase your risk for heart disease, cancer and lung diseases. *To stop smoking:*
 - Make a plan to stop smoking; decide how you will quit.
 - Ask your healthcare provider for help to stop smoking.
- **Take blood pressure medicines as prescribed.** There are many types of medicines to help treat high blood pressure. If the type you take doesn't seem to be working or causes side effects, talk to your provider about other choices. And remember: you still need to follow the lifestyle changes listed above. *If you take medicine for your blood pressure:*
 - Learn about the medicines you take to control your blood pressure.
 - Use pill boxes, timers or a calendar to help you remember to take your medicine.
- **Reduce stress.** Daily stresses in your life can raise your blood pressure. Learning how to reduce stress can help. *To lower stress:*
 - Take deep breaths whenever you feel tense or “stressed out”.
 - Make changes in your home or work place that will help you feel less stressed.
 - Sign up for a yoga or meditation class to help you relax and unwind
- **Learn how to check your blood pressure at home.** Knowing what your blood pressure is can help you take steps to improve it. *To check your blood pressure at home or at work:*
 - Purchase a home blood pressure monitor and learn how to use it.
 - Keep a record of your blood pressure readings and bring them to your appointments with your healthcare provider.

Choose one or two of the steps listed above that you can take over the next two weeks to lower your blood pressure. You'll be on the road to good health.