Why Worry About High Blood Pressure?

High blood pressure (hypertension) is called the “silent killer.” It has no symptoms, but it can lead to serious health problems. These include heart disease, heart attack, stroke, blindness, and kidney disease. Your healthcare provider can tell you if you have high blood pressure. If you have it or are at risk for having it, learn the skills in this guide. They can help you stay on the path to good health.

What’s Ahead

Each of the skills covered in this booklet can help you control your blood pressure. These skills include:

Skill 1 ................ Knowing Your Risk Factors .................... Page 4
Skill 2 ................ Eating Healthier ................................... Page 6
Skill 3 ................ Exercising Regularly ............................. Page 8
Skill 4 ................ Quitting for a Smoke-free Heart ............. Page 10
Skill 5 ................ Reducing the Stress in Your Life .......... Page 11
Skill 6 ................ Taking Blood Pressure Medication .......... Page 12
Skill 7 ................ Setting SMART Goals ............................ Page 14
What Is High Blood Pressure?

The only way to know if your blood pressure is high is to get it checked.

The heart moves blood through the body. “Blood pressure” is a measure of how hard the moving blood pushes against blood vessel walls. High blood pressure means the heart is working extra hard to move blood. In time, this can damage the heart, blood vessels, kidneys, eyes, and other organs. Controlling blood pressure helps prevent this damage.

Normal blood pressure is under 120/80. Prehypertension is 120/80 to 139/89. Hypertension starts at 140/90.

How Blood Pressure Is Measured

Measuring blood pressure is quick, painless, and easy to do. A blood pressure cuff is wrapped around your upper arm. The cuff is then pumped with air and will feel tight. As air is let out of the cuff, the reading is taken. A reading has two numbers:

- The first, higher number measures pressure when your heart beats (systolic blood pressure).
- The second, lower number measures the pressure between beats (diastolic blood pressure).

If either number is high for several readings, you may be diagnosed with high blood pressure.

Taking Your Own Measurements

You may be asked to take your own blood pressure readings on a regular basis. Your healthcare provider can show you how to do it. Keep these tips in mind:

- Take your blood pressure as often as you are told to.
- Keep track of your numbers for each reading.
**Skill 1**

**Knowing Your Risk Factors**

*Don't dwell on risk factors you can't change. Instead, focus on the things you can change.*

“Risk factors” are things that make you more likely to have high blood pressure. You can’t do anything about some risk factors. But other risk factors are things you *can* change. Find out what risk factors you have. Then use the other skills in this guide to help make changes for the better.

**Risk Factors You Can’t Control**

Though you can’t change any of the things listed below, check off the ones that apply to you. The more boxes you check, the greater your risk for high blood pressure.

**Family history**

- One or both of your parents or grandparents has had high blood pressure or heart disease.
- A close male relative has had heart disease or a heart attack before age 55.
- A close female relative has had heart disease or a heart attack before age 65.

**Gender and age**

You’re a man over age 55 or a woman past menopause.
SKILL 1  
Knowing Your Risk Factors

Risk Factors You Can Control

There are plenty of risk factors for high blood pressure that you can control. Learn what these risk factors are and then find out how to reduce your risk. Check the ones that apply to you.

- **What You Eat**
  Do you eat a lot of fast food, canned food, or frozen meals? Learn more about controlling this risk factor on page 6.

- **How Active You Are**
  Do you avoid exercise at work and at home? Learn more about controlling this risk factor on page 8.

- **How Much You Weigh**
  Has your doctor said that you are more than 15 pounds over your ideal weight? The changes on pages 6 to 9 help with controlling this risk factor.

- **If You Smoke**
  Do you smoke cigarettes or cigars, chew tobacco, or dip snuff? Learn more about controlling this risk factor on page 10.

- **Your Stress Level**
  Do you often feel anxious, nervous, and stressed? Learn more about controlling this risk factor on page 11.

Choose What to Work On First

Now you know some of the risk factors you can work on to help control your blood pressure. But don’t try to change everything at once.

1. Read through this booklet. Choose a skill or skills to try first.
2. Practice that skill until it becomes a habit. It takes at least two months for this to happen. So keep at it.
3. When you’re ready, choose another skill to try. The more skills you master, the better you will be able to control your blood pressure.
Eating Healthier

Healthy eating doesn’t mean a short-term “diet.” It’s meant to last a lifetime.

Choosing healthy foods can help you control your blood pressure. It can also help you lose excess weight. Learn to eat less sodium, less fat, and fewer calories. Eating healthier isn’t hard. It just takes doing.

Reduce Sodium, Trim Fat, and Cut Calories

Cutting down on sodium (salt), fat, and calories are healthy ways to lose weight and control blood pressure. Pick a few of these changes to try this week:

- Put away the saltshaker. Also avoid high-salt foods such as lunch meats, canned soups, and packaged snacks.
- Eat at least 5 cups of fresh vegetables and fruits each day.
- Pick whole grains instead of processed choices.
- Avoid fried foods. Bake, steam, or broil instead.
- Drink fat-free or low-fat (1%) milk instead of whole or reduced-fat (2%) milk.
- Switch to reduced-calorie versions of spreads, salad dressings, and mayonnaise.

Slow and Steady

Here are some tips to make changes easier:

- Make food changes slowly. If you like meat and potatoes, don’t suddenly switch to salads. Work small changes into each meal.
- Know it may take a little while to get used to using less salt. Herbs, pepper, and other spices can help.
- Sometimes a craving can’t be ignored. But decide to get right back on track. One slip isn’t a problem unless you let it derail your whole plan.

Sources of hidden sodium include MSG, soy sauce, steak sauce, packaged rice and pasta meals, and processed cheese.
Food Labels Can Help You
Most packaged foods have a label called “Nutrition Facts.” This label tells you all about what you’re eating. Reading these labels can help you cut down on calories, fat, and sodium. It can also help you be sure you’re eating a healthy, well-balanced diet that’s good for your heart.

Questions for Your Doctor
Make sure you’re doing all you can to control your blood pressure. Ask your doctor these questions:

- Do I need to lose weight? If so, how much?
- Should I get more calcium, potassium, and magnesium? (These minerals may help prevent high blood pressure in some people.)
- Do I drink too much alcohol? (More than 2 drinks a day can raise blood pressure. Generally, no more than 2 drinks per day for most men and no more than 1 drink per day for most women is best.)
- Am I taking any medications that can increase blood pressure? Are there any herbs or supplements I should avoid?
Skill 3

Exercising Regularly

Being active helps make your whole body healthier and is a great tool for controlling blood pressure.

Regular exercise is one of the major keys to better health. It lowers your blood pressure. It helps you lose weight. And it makes your body stronger and healthier. You don’t need to run marathons. Regular, moderate activity is all you need.

How Exercise Helps
Here are some of the ways daily exercise can help you control your blood pressure:

• It helps you lose weight and keep it off.
• It helps your heart and blood vessels work better.
• It relieves stress and helps you sleep better.
• It may decrease the amount of blood pressure medication you need.

Make a Move
To help your heart, work up to getting at least 30 minutes of exercise over the course of the day. Below is a list of good ways to exercise. Check off any that you think you might like. Then find ways to work one or two into your routine.

- Walking
- Aerobics class
- Dancing
- Swimming
- Cycling
- Basketball
- Volleyball
- Roller skating
- Tennis
- Climbing stairs

Make a list of reasons to exercise and read it whenever you need motivation.
**Skill 3**

**Exercising Regularly**

**Ways to Get Moving**

If you haven’t exercised in a while, it may seem too hard to even start. But you *can* do it. Start slowly by being more active as you go about your life. A little here and there really adds up. Here are some quick ways to work activity into your day. Check off two to try this week:

- Do some gardening or yardwork.
- Get off the subway or bus a few blocks early.
- Walk to do errands close by instead of driving.
- Go out dancing instead of sitting at a movie.
- Use the stairs instead of the elevator for a few floors.
- Choose the parking spot farthest away from the door.
- Walk to coworkers instead of using the phone.
- Keep a pair of walking shoes in your car or office. Take breaks to walk around the block.
- Get up and move around while you watch TV. Better yet, turn off the TV and take a walk instead.
- Join a beginning stretch or yoga class.

**Questions for Your Doctor or Fitness Professional**

Always talk to your doctor before you start an exercise program. You may also want to work with a fitness professional. Good questions to ask include:

- Are there any activities I should avoid?
- How many minutes of exercise should I start with? How many should I add each week?
- Do I need to take my pulse and figure my heart rate? Is there a number I should keep my heart rate below while I exercise?
- Should I also try some strength-training exercises? (Strength training builds and tones muscles. But it may also raise blood pressure for a short time. Don’t do it without instruction.)
**SKILL 4**

**Quitting for a Smoke-free Heart**

Quitting smoking is one of the best things you can do for your heart and your health.

Do you smoke or use tobacco in other ways? If you do, it is likely to be your biggest risk factor for high blood pressure. Smoking is linked with high blood pressure and may make it harder to control. Quitting is tough. But millions of people have done it. You can quit, too!

**Why Quit?**

Below are reasons to quit smoking, chewing, or dipping. Check off any that matter to you. Then, add other reasons to quit.

- It keeps my blood pressure high, even if I make all the other changes I’m supposed to.
- It damages my body, especially my heart, lungs, and blood vessels.
- It makes me more likely to have a heart attack, stroke, or cancer.
- It stains my teeth and makes my skin, clothes, and breath smell bad.
- It’s expensive.
- _____________________________________________
- _____________________________________________

**Tips for Quitting**

Ready to quit? Use these tips to help you get started:

- Pick a quit date. Write it on your calendar. Then, stick to it.
- Find a buddy to quit with you.
- Tell family and friends that you’re quitting. Then tell them how they can help you.
- Talk with your doctor about medications and other aids that can help you quit smoking.
**Skill 5**

Reducing the Stress in Your Life

You can’t always avoid stress. But you can learn to change the way you respond to it.

People with high blood pressure are *not* more nervous or tense than other people. But stress does raise blood pressure for a short time. Constant stress can make it harder to keep blood pressure under control. Help your heart by learning to control your reaction to stress.

**Do You Put Stress on Yourself?**

Stress can affect your body, causing troublesome symptoms. Many of the symptoms stress can cause are listed below. Check off any you’ve had in the past month:

- Headaches
- Tiredness
- Upset stomach
- Trouble sleeping
- Skin problems
- Forgetfulness
- Impatience, irritability
- Nervousness, anxiety
- Poor concentration
- Stiff neck and tense shoulders
- Eating too much

**Tips for Reducing Stress**

There are many ways to help keep stress under control. Try some of these:

- Get enough sleep. A well-rested body is less likely to react to every little problem.
- Exercise regularly. It helps your body handle stress.
- Get a pet. Pets have been shown to help reduce stress.
- Learn how to let things go. Remember that everyone makes mistakes—even you.
- Expect things to go wrong once in a while. You really *can’t* control the weather, traffic, or others’ moods.
Sometimes, healthy habits alone are not enough to lower high blood pressure. You may also need medication to help keep your blood pressure at a safe level. If so, your doctor will prescribe it. Be sure to tell your doctor about any medications, over-the-counter drugs, vitamins and minerals, or herbal supplements you use. For the best results, stick with the healthy changes and take your medications as directed.

Types of Blood Pressure Medications

- Diuretics remove excess water and certain minerals from your blood. This reduces the volume of blood flowing through your vessels and lowers blood pressure.

- Beta-blockers keep your heart from pumping too hard. This decreases the force of blood against blood vessels, lowering your blood pressure.

- Vasodilators relax blood vessels. This opens up blood flow and lowers blood pressure.

Understanding Side Effects

Side effects are symptoms a medication may cause. They are most common when you first start taking a medication. Dizziness, headaches, or blurred vision are examples of side effects. They can be frustrating, especially if you didn’t feel sick before. But these symptoms often lessen or go away in a few weeks. Tell your doctor if you have side effects. He or she may change your dose (the amount of medication you take) or your medication.
**SKILL 6  Taking Blood Pressure Medication**

**Make Medication Part of Your Day**
Your medication can’t help you if you don’t take it. Do you remember to take it every day? The tips below may help:

- Take your medication at the same time each day, such as when you brush your teeth in the morning or at night.
- Keep it out where you can see it (but out of the reach of children).
- Put reminder notes on your bathroom mirror.
- Use a pill box or pill counter to help you keep track of your medication.

**Questions for Your Doctor or Pharmacist**
Be sure you know the answers to these questions:

- How many pills should I take? When should I take them?
- Should I take the pills before, during, or after eating?
- What side effects should I expect? When should I call you about side effects?
- What should I do if I forget to take a pill?
- Are there any medications I should avoid?

**Medication Chart**

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Have you ever been motivated to make changes in your life, only to lose interest as time passes? Take the next step: Commit yourself to your goals. Also look for ways to motivate yourself to reach your goals. By taking these steps, you’ll start on the road to a lifetime of good health.

**SPECIFIC**

Be specific about your goals. Set goals that address the results you want. Your goals should challenge you. But they should also be within reach. What do you want to have happen?

*Example:* My goal is to exercise for 30 minutes, 5 days a week.

**MEASURABLE**

Choose goals that have results you can measure. Give yourself a deadline, such as a week, a month, or six months from now.

*Example:* I’ll start by exercising for 15 minutes, 3 days a week, and work up to 30 minutes, 3 days a week, by the end of the month.

**ACHIEVABLE**

Can you achieve your goals? You don’t want to discourage yourself. Keep in mind that you can always raise the bar after you’ve reached your first set of goals.

*Example:* I’ll keep walking shoes in my office and walk at lunch.

**REWARDING**

Give yourself nonfood rewards. How will you reward yourself along the way? Will it be when you achieve your goal? When you pass a milestone on the way to that goal?

*Example:* If I make my goal this month, I’ll treat myself to a movie.

**TRACKABLE**

How will you track your progress? Doing so helps you to see a slip as only a brief setback that you can easily overcome.

*Example:* I’ll schedule my walks on a calendar and cross them off as I do them.
Make Your Commitment
Start with a few small goals. Use the SMART model to define these goals. Then, use the contract below to help you commit to them. Share your plan with someone who can help support you as you reach your goals. Have him or her sign the contract too. Then get started putting your plan into action.

**My Blood Pressure Control Contract**

I, ______________________, set the following specific, measurable, and achievable goals for myself:

- ______________________
- ______________________
- ______________________

I will give myself the following rewards for reaching these goals:

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I will keep track of my progress in the following ways:

- ______________________
- ______________________
- ______________________
- ______________________
- ______________________

Signed: ______________________  Date: ______________________
Witnessed by: ______________________  Date: ______________________
Staying on Track

You want to control your blood pressure but don’t know where to start? Begin by setting a few small goals. When you reach those, set a few more. As you set and reach more goals, you will be well on your way to keeping your blood pressure under control.

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