

# Understanding Blood Pressure Readings

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## What do your blood pressure numbers mean?

Understanding your blood pressure numbers is key to controlling high blood pressure.

## Healthy and unhealthy blood pressure ranges

Learn what's considered normal, as recommended by the [American Heart Association](#).

Blood Pressure Category	Systolic mm Hg (upper #)		Diastolic mm Hg (lower #)
Normal	less than 120	and	less than 80
Prehypertension	120 – 139	or	80 – 89
High Blood Pressure (Hypertension) Stage 1	140 – 159	or	90 – 99
High Blood Pressure (Hypertension) Stage 2	160 or higher	or	100 or higher
<b>Hypertensive Crisis</b> (Emergency care needed)	<b>Higher than 180</b>	<b>or</b>	<b>Higher than 110</b>

Note: A diagnosis of high blood pressure must be confirmed with a medical professional. A doctor should also evaluate any unusually [low blood pressure readings](#). Additionally, lower targets may be appropriate for some populations such as [African-Americans](#), the elderly, or patients with underlying issues such as diabetes mellitus or chronic kidney disease.

## Blood pressure categories:

The five blood pressure ranges as recognized by the American Heart Association are:

- **Normal blood pressure**  
Congratulations on having blood pressure numbers that are within the normal (optimal) range of less than 120/80 mm Hg. Keep up the good work and stick with [heart-healthy habits](#) like following a balanced diet and getting regular exercise.
- **Prehypertension (early stage high blood pressure)**  
Prehypertension is when blood pressure is consistently ranging from 120-139/80-89 mm Hg. People with prehypertension are likely to develop high blood pressure unless steps are taken to [control it](#).
- **Hypertension Stage 1**  
Hypertension Stage 1 is when blood pressure is consistently ranging from 140-159/90-99 mm Hg. At this stage of high blood pressure, doctors are likely to prescribe lifestyle changes and may consider adding blood pressure medication.

- **Hypertension Stage 2**

Hypertension Stage 2 is when blood pressure is consistently ranging at levels greater than 160/100 mm Hg. At this stage of high blood pressure, doctors are likely to prescribe a combination of blood pressure medications along with lifestyle changes.

- **Hypertensive crisis**

This is when high blood pressure requires emergency medical attention. If your blood pressure is higher than 180/110 mm Hg and you are NOT experiencing symptoms such as chest pain, shortness of breath, back pain, numbness/weakness, changes in vision or difficulty speaking, wait about five minutes and take it again. If the reading is still at or above that level, you should CALL 9-1-1 and get help immediately. Learn more about the [two types of hypertensive crises](#).

### Your blood pressure numbers and what they mean:

Your blood pressure is recorded as two numbers:

- **Systolic blood pressure** (the upper number) — indicates how much pressure your blood is exerting against your artery walls when the heart beats.
- **Diastolic blood pressure** (the lower number) — indicates how much pressure your blood is exerting against your artery walls while the heart is resting between beats.

### Which number is more important?

Typically, more attention is given to systolic blood pressure (the top number) as a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease for people over 50. In most people, systolic blood pressure rises steadily with age due to the increasing stiffness of large arteries, long-term build-up of plaque and an increased incidence of cardiac and vascular disease. However, elevated systolic or diastolic blood pressure alone may be used to make a diagnosis of high blood pressure. And, according to recent studies, the risk of death from ischemic heart disease and stroke doubles with every 20 mm Hg systolic or 10 mm Hg diastolic increase among people from age 40 to 89.

### What are the Symptoms of High Blood Pressure?

#### Looking for a list of symptoms?

If you are looking for a list of symptoms and signs of [high blood pressure](#) (HBP or hypertension), you won't find them here. This is because most of the time, there are none.

**Myth:** People with high blood pressure will experience symptoms, like nervousness, sweating, difficulty sleeping or facial flushing.

**Truth:** High blood pressure is a largely symptomless “silent killer.” If you ignore your blood pressure because you think a certain symptom or sign will alert you to the problem, you are taking a dangerous chance with your life

#### In most cases, high blood pressure does not cause headaches or nosebleeds

- The best evidence indicates that high blood pressure does not cause headaches or nosebleeds, except in the case of [hypertensive crisis](#), a medical emergency when blood pressure is 180/110 mm Hg or higher. If your blood pressure is unusually high AND you have headache or nosebleed and are feeling unwell, wait five minutes and retest. If your reading remains at 180/110 mm Hg or higher, call 9-1-1.
- If you are experiencing severe headaches or nosebleeds and are otherwise unwell, contact your doctor as they could be symptoms of other health conditions.

#### Other inconclusively related symptoms

A variety of symptoms may be indirectly related to, but are not always caused by, high blood pressure, such as:

- **Blood spots in the eyes**  
Blood spots in the eyes (subconjunctival hemorrhage) are more common in people with diabetes or high blood pressure, but neither condition causes the blood spots. Floaters in the eyes are also not related to high blood pressure. However, an eye doctor (ophthalmologist) may be able to detect damage to the [optic nerve](#) caused by

untreated high blood pressure.

- **Facial flushing**

Facial flushing occurs when blood vessels in the face dilate. It can occur unpredictably or in response to certain triggers such as sun exposure, cold weather, spicy foods, wind, hot drinks and skin-care products. Facial flushing can also occur with emotional stress, exposure to heat or hot water, alcohol consumption and exercise — all of which can raise blood pressure temporarily. While facial flushing may occur while your blood pressure is higher than usual, high blood pressure is not the cause of facial flushing.

- **Dizziness**

While dizziness can be a side effect of some [blood pressure medications](#), it is not caused by high blood pressure. However, dizziness should not be ignored, especially if the onset is sudden. Sudden dizziness, loss of balance or coordination and trouble walking are all warning signs of a stroke. High blood pressure is a leading risk factor for [stroke](#).

## Changes You Can Make to Manage High Blood Pressure

### Fighting back against the “silent killer”

[High blood pressure](#) (HBP or hypertension) is a symptomless “silent killer” that quietly damages blood vessels and leads to serious [health threats](#).

While there is no cure, using medications as prescribed and making positive lifestyle changes can help enhance your quality of life and reduce your risk of heart disease, stroke, kidney disease and more.

#### Make changes that matter:

- [Eat a well-balanced, low-salt diet.](#)
- [Limit alcohol.](#)
- [Enjoy regular physical activity.](#)
- [Maintain a healthy weight.](#)
- [Take your medications properly.](#)

### Managing blood pressure is a lifelong commitment

[Listen to and partner with your doctor](#), read sound information on your condition, learn how to [monitor your blood pressure at home](#) and act on this information to live a heart-healthy life.

#### By adopting a heart-healthy lifestyle, you can:

- Reduce high blood pressure.
- Prevent or delay the development of high blood pressure.
- Enhance the effectiveness of blood pressure medications.
- Lower your risk of [heart attack](#), [stroke](#), [heart failure](#), [kidney damage](#), [vision loss](#) and [sexual dysfunction](#).

