

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

Frequently Asked Questions

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What is it?

Hypertension (high blood pressure) is a condition in which there is an excessive amount of pressure within the blood vessels. This can occur either during the heart's contractions (the systolic, or top number), when the heart relaxes (the diastolic, or bottom number), or both.

What causes it?

In most cases, the cause is unknown. This condition is called "essential hypertension". Much research has looked into genetic and hormonal factors, but the specific mechanism has remained elusive. There is often a family history of high blood pressure that is passed on through the generations. In some cases, the specific cause can be identified and treated. These cases are rare, and can involve blockage to an artery that feeds the kidneys, benign tumors of the adrenal glands, etc. We look specifically for these cases in young people with hypertension, and in those whose blood pressure is unusually difficult to control, even with medication.

Why is it bad to have high blood pressure?

It used to be felt that when the blood pressure was elevated, the rise was necessary to perfuse vital organs (hence the name, "essential" hypertension), but gradually it became apparent that when blood pressure is elevated, it is **not** "essential." Indeed, it damages vital organs. We now know that high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart failure, kidney failure, and heart attacks.

How high is high?

Now we're getting into a somewhat fuzzy area. There is no magic number above which the pressure is bad, and below which the pressure is OK. Generally, we like to keep the systolic pressure (the top number) at least below 140 – and even lower in young or middle-aged people and in those with heart disease or diabetes. We perhaps allow a somewhat higher number in older people. The diastolic pressure (the bottom number) should be kept below 90 in everyone. Recent studies generally conclude that the lower the better, and that the damaging effects of high blood pressure begin at lower pressures than we used to think.

But my blood pressure is lower at home. Do I still have high blood pressure?

In most cases, your blood pressure is lower at home and when you are relaxed, compared with the readings in the doctor's office. It must be remembered, though, that the studies that showed that high blood pressure is dangerous, and defined the levels at which it is harmful, were done in doctors' offices and clinics. Thus, it may be that your blood pressure during levels of stress (rather than during times of relaxation) is what determines whether there will be damage to vital organs. Studies have shown that blood pressure that is elevated only during activity or during times of stress can still cause great damage, and frequently requires treatment.

Interestingly, some patients will notice that their readings are actually higher at home, especially in the morning, than here in the office. This may be because their daily medication (which they take in the morning) has not had a chance to take full effect. The blood pressure would then be expected to fall during the course of the morning and afternoon.

Home readings do have a place in the monitoring of blood pressure, and we should chat about the readings when you come into the office. Bring your cuff in on at least one occasion, so I can check it against the mercury cuff here, to be sure your cuff is properly calibrated. If you don't have your own blood pressure cuff, you can take a measurement at many grocery stores. Consider purchasing your own cuff – it's useful to have and will add to our ability to give you just the right amount of medicine. In the office, we can discuss how often and when to take your blood pressure.

If you take a number of blood pressure readings, you will also undoubtedly note that your blood pressure fluctuates a lot. Readings will typically vary by as much as 30-40 points in the course of the day, depending on time of day, activity level, meals, etc. The body is a living organism, and no matter what we measure, readings will vary a lot. Don't be surprised or alarmed. Collect the data, and we'll go over it when you come in to the office.

What can I do to lower my blood pressure (besides medicine)?

The answer is simple, though not necessarily easy to achieve. First: lose weight if you are overweight. Every little bit helps. Don't think in terms of your ideal weight; just begin the weight loss trend. Minimize salt in your diet. Though not everyone is sensitive to dietary salt to the same degree, most people will drop their pressure to

some extent by reducing salt intake. Stop smoking. You already knew that! And not only for blood pressure control, but for heart health, to prevent cancer, etc. Limit caffeine and alcohol (We can chat about the specifics of how much.) Exercise!

If I begin medicine, will I need to take it the rest of my life?

Often, but not necessarily. Sometimes, blood pressure can be lowered, as mentioned, with changes in diet, exercise, weight loss, etc. If these changes are made, medication can often be withdrawn. Occasionally, stressful periods of our lives can cause high blood pressure. Once these times pass, medication can occasionally be eliminated, or at least reduced in amount. Most of the time, though, high blood pressure is indeed a lifelong issue.

Will I have side effects from the medicine? I heard that it will “slow me down”

In the majority of cases, medicine used to lower blood pressure has no side effects at all. In fact, studies have shown that patients often feel much better and more energetic once their blood pressure is controlled. However, all medicines have potential side effects, however infrequent. If you feel that your medicine is causing a particular symptom, let's chat.

What about the expense?

Prescription medicine is certainly expensive. Be assured that I am sensitive to this. I will use the fewest number of medicines as possible, and will use lower-priced generics whenever I can. If cost is a big issue, please be sure to let me know, and we'll do what we can to minimize your expense. Some insurance plans favor one medicine over another in terms of cost – these are called “preferred” medications. Let me know if this applies to you.

Most often, more than one medication is needed to adequately control high blood pressure. Also, many of the newer agents are not yet available as generics. They may well cost more, but may be more effective and cause side effects less often. The key is to control your blood pressure and avoid side effects.

It is very important that we control your blood pressure. If not, we will likely face complications. Remember also that the complications of high blood pressure will not only be a lot more costly in terms of money, but that they will often be debilitating as well. We absolutely must “keep our eye on the prize” – normal blood pressure and minimal side effects.