

Hypertension

(High Blood Pressure)

What is hypertension?

High blood pressure is a common condition in which the long-term force of the blood against your artery walls is high enough that it may eventually cause health problems. The more blood your heart pumps and the narrower your arteries, the higher your blood pressure.

How does hypertension affect my heart?

Uncontrolled high blood pressure increases your risk of serious health problems, including heart attacks and strokes.

How do I know if I have high blood pressure?

The only way to know if you have hypertension is by having your blood pressure tested.

Symptoms

You can have high blood pressure (hypertension) for years without any symptoms. A few people with high blood pressure may have headaches, shortness of breath or nosebleeds, but these signs and symptoms aren't specific and usually don't occur until high blood pressure has reached a severe or life-threatening stage.

RISK FACTORS

High blood pressure has many risk factors, including:

- Age. The risk of high blood pressure increases as you age.
- Family history. High blood pressure tends to run in families.
- Being overweight or obese. The more you weigh the more blood you need to supply oxygen and nutrients to your tissues. As the volume of blood circulated through your blood vessels increases, so does the pressure on your artery walls.
- Not being physically active. People who are inactive tend to have higher heart rates. The higher your heart rate, the harder your heart must work with each contraction and the stronger the force on your arteries. Lack of physical activity also increases the risk of being overweight.
- Using tobacco. Not only does smoking or chewing tobacco immediately raise your blood pressure temporarily, but the chemicals in tobacco can damage the lining of your artery walls. This can cause your arteries to narrow and increase your risk of heart disease. Second hand smoke also can increase your heart disease risk.
- Too much salt (sodium) in your diet. Too much sodium in your diet can cause your body to retain fluid, which increases blood pressure.

- Too little potassium in your diet. Potassium helps balance the amount of sodium in your cells. If you don't get enough potassium in your diet or retain enough potassium, you may accumulate too much sodium in your blood.
- Drinking too much alcohol. Over time, heavy drinking can damage your heart. Having more than one drink a day for women and more than two drinks a day for men may affect your blood pressure.
- Stress. High levels of stress can lead to a temporary increase in blood pressure. If you try to relax by eating more, using tobacco or drinking alcohol, you may only increase problems with high blood pressure.
- Certain chronic conditions. Certain chronic conditions also may increase your risk of high blood pressure, such as kidney disease, diabetes and sleep apnoea.

Although high blood pressure is most common in adults, children may be at risk, too. For some children, high blood pressure is caused by problems with the kidneys or heart. But for a growing number of kids, poor lifestyle habits, such as an unhealthy diet, obesity and lack of exercise, contribute to high blood pressure.

LIFESTYLE CHANGES

Lifestyle changes can help you control and prevent high blood pressure, even if you're taking blood pressure medication. Here's what you can do:

- Eat healthy foods. Eat a heart-healthy diet. Try the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet, which emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, poultry, fish and low-fat dairy foods.
- Decrease the salt in your diet. While you can reduce the amount of salt