



Monthly Wellness SpotLight by PSA

IN GOOD HEALTH

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE IS THE SILENT KILLER

According to the American Heart Association, nearly 20 percent of adult Americans are living with hypertension (high blood pressure) and don't know it, and only about half of the 78 million Americans diagnosed with hypertension are controlling it. Uncontrolled high blood pressure is a major risk factor for devastating health problems—including stroke, heart attack, heart failure, and kidney disease. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to prevent and control high blood pressure. Here are eight key questions and answers regarding hypertension.

What are the symptoms of hypertension?

There usually are none, which is why it's called the silent killer. But if your blood pressure climbs to extreme highs, you might experience a severe headache, chest pain, shortness of breath, vision changes, or a nosebleed.

Am I at risk for high blood pressure?

Men and women are equally at risk over their lifetimes. However, according to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, hypertension is more common in African American adults than in adults of other races. It's usually impossible to identify an exact cause of high blood pressure, but it has been linked to risk factors including family history of hypertension or an unhealthy lifestyle including smoking, too much salt in your diet, too much alcohol, lack of exercise, excessive weight, and chronic stress.

Why is blood pressure measured in two numbers? Are they equally important?

Blood pressure readings have a top and bottom number, such as 120/80. The top "systolic" number measures artery pressure when the heart beats, pumping blood to the organs. The bottom, or "diastolic," number measures the pressure of blood in the arteries between beats, when the heart relaxes. For people 50 and older, the top number is more significant. Systolic blood pressure rises steadily with age because of changes in blood vessels.

What are "good" blood pressure numbers?

Lower than 120/80 is considered a normal, healthy reading. Higher numbers—up to 139/89—suggest prehypertension, when you need to start making lifestyle changes to head off full-blown hypertension. A reading of 140/90 signals hypertension.

Can I avoid or control high blood pressure with lifestyle changes?

Researchers all agree that you can help control blood pressure if you reduce your salt intake, eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, exercise, and maintain a healthy weight.

Does alcohol affect my blood pressure? What about caffeine?

Having a drink often lowers blood pressure but excessive drinking can contribute to hypertension. As for caffeine, if you metabolize caffeine quickly, it has no effect on your blood pressure. But if you metabolize it slowly, it can raise blood pressure.

What's the best way to check my blood pressure on my own?

A manual blood pressure monitor, the least expensive, includes an inflatable arm cuff, a gauge for readings, and a stethoscope. A digital cuff monitor inflates and deflates automatically and calculates blood pressure. You'll also find digital monitors for wrist or finger—but they generally aren't recommended. A digital cuff is easier to manage than a manual cuff. Make sure the cuff is properly positioned on the arm. Relax with your arm supported on a table when you take readings. For accuracy, take a couple of readings—wait five minutes between them—and average them.

If I have to take blood pressure drugs, do they have side effects?

Different categories of medications can produce different side effects, including fatigue, dizziness, insomnia, sexual dysfunction, dry mouth, more frequent urination, and even a cough. Work with your doctor to find the right medication.

Do not let yourself become a victim of this silent killer. To protect your health, it's important to have your blood pressure checked by a professional at least once a year. You can also make some simple changes such as adjusting your eating habits, creating an exercise routine, or taking your medicine as prescribed to control your blood pressure and ensure a healthier tomorrow.

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