



Blood Pressure

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is a measurement of the pressure within the arteries when your heart beats. As your heart beats the pressure in your arteries rises and falls. A rise corresponds with the heart contracting forcing blood through and the falls are when the heart is relaxed, waiting for the next heartbeat. When your blood pressure is taken, the measurement is expressed as two numbers e.g. 120/80 mmHg. The first number related to the pressure at the peak of the rise (systolic), and the second as the base of the fall (diastolic). All blood pressures are measured in millimetres of mercury.

What do all the numbers mean, what is high or low blood pressure?

Our blood pressure varies throughout the day according to what you are doing. At rest the heart does not need to work as hard, so your blood pressure should be within normal limits. When you get up and move around, the heart needs to pump harder and faster to deliver more blood as the muscles of the body require more to make energy. Our blood pressure changes all the time depending on the type of activities we are carrying out. Vigorous physical activity raises our blood pressure and when we are asleep or inactive our blood pressure is lower. Blood Pressure can also rise due to anxiety, excitement and nervousness. So for this reason a series of blood pressure readings will be needed to accurately assess your blood pressure. Persistent high blood pressure is called hypertension. This assessment is made by your doctor.

High blood pressure or hypertension is classified by the Heart Foundation as above 140/90mmHg. Normal blood pressure is however said to be below 130/85mmHg. If you have heart disease or diabetes the aim is to be 130/80mmHg or below. To determine if you have high blood pressure the reading should be taken at rest and confirmed at another time.

Low blood pressure is however different for everybody. People who naturally have a blood pressure of 100/70 may feel fine when it drops to 90/60, yet others who usually have a blood pressure of 150/90 may feel dizzy or sick with a blood pressure of 100/70. This is due to their body becoming used to their blood pressure being higher, and they not being able to tolerate such a drop in blood pressure in a short period of time.

How do you get high blood pressure and what does it do?

High blood pressure develops over a long period of time. There are risk factors which increase someone's chances of developing high blood pressure, these include obesity, poor diet, lack of physical activity, stress, smoking and excessive alcohol intake. There are other risk factors which are not controllable by us and these are; getting older, family history and some ethnic groups are at a higher risk than others.

Mostly people are not aware that their blood pressure is high as you can feel fine, but having a high blood pressure over a long period of time can do significant damage to your body. Your blood pressure can be checked when you visit your GP and they use guidelines set down by the National Heart Foundation to know how regularly they should test your blood pressure and when to initiate treatment for elevated blood pressure.

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When we have high blood pressure the heart needs to do more work to pump the same amount of blood around the body, this can cause the heart to become enlarged. Extra pressure on artery walls also makes them become harder, less elastic and makes it easier for plaque to build up. This can cause an increased risk of a heart attack or stroke. High blood pressure can also damage your kidneys. When you have high blood pressure with other conditions like diabetes, obesity, high cholesterol or if you smoke, your risks of developing these problems increase.

How to reduce your blood pressure

To avoid getting high blood pressure, maintain a healthy weight, be physically active, do not smoke, drink alcohol in moderation, have a healthy diet and reduce salt intake. If you already have high blood pressure it is important that you take your prescribed medication and see your GP regularly for check-ups. Talk to your GP if you have any questions about your blood pressure and further information can be obtained from the National Heart Foundations website www.heartfoundation.com.au

Taking your blood pressure at home

If you want to be able to take your blood pressure at home it is important that you are aware of the correct technique for doing so.

When buying a blood pressure machine, no matter what type, you need to be comfortable with how to use it, so make sure you read all instructions thoroughly.

For a resting blood pressure

- Make sure you are in a comfortable position sitting or lying without distractions like the TV or others talking
- Wait 5 to 15 minutes for your blood pressure to settle
- Put on the cuff on your upper arm around 3 cm above your elbow crease, with the pressure sensing device on the inside of your arm
- Make sure you are sitting or lying that arm in level with your heart
- If you have an aneroid monitor, you will need to place a stethoscope over the pulse in your elbow crease and inflate the cuff around 40mmHg above your normal blood pressure. Slowly let the air from the valve till you can hear your heart beat. These first sounds indicate your systolic blood pressure. Still slowly decreasing the pressure, you will hear your heart beat until you reach your diastolic blood pressure, where the sound goes away. Aneroid tend to be more accurate, but pose problems if you have hearing or sight difficulties and you do need to have good technique.
- If you have an electronic machine you will just turn it on and press the inflate/start button or pump up the bulb when it is ready. The machine will deflate the cuff on its own and give you the reading after, often with your heart rate as well.

Other considerations

Your doctor may ask you to take your blood pressure differently to see if it changes under different circumstances (like if you get dizzy first thing in the morning when you get up). Just make sure you know exactly how they want you to take it.

Recording the results is often a good way of seeing patterns in your blood pressure. Also record different things you did where there are abnormal results or if you had missed some medication or had your medications or doses changed.

Remember it is not necessary to do your blood pressure all the time and while it is a useful tool in managing high blood pressure expect your results to not always be perfect. If you have a very high or low result, wait a few minutes and then repeat it. If you have any further concerns about a persistent high blood pressure see your doctor.