

# High Blood Pressure

## also called hypertension

**Blood pressure is the pressure of blood against blood vessel walls. We all need some blood pressure, called normal blood pressure, to stay alive, but blood pressure that is higher than normal can be dangerous. A healthy lifestyle helps keep blood pressure normal and certain medicines can help treat high blood pressure.**

Everyone's blood pressure varies with their daily activities. For example, our blood pressure is usually lower during sleep and higher when we are excited or anxious. However, blood pressure that is constantly higher or lower than the normal range can cause serious problems. The medical name for constantly high blood pressure is hypertension.

### Signs and symptoms

Most people with high blood pressure have no symptoms and feel well. However, over time, constantly high blood pressure can cause heart and blood vessel disease and lead to problems including:



- Brain damage (e.g., stroke, dementia)
- Heart damage (e.g., heart attack, heart failure)
- Kidney damage
- Eye damage (e.g., blindness).

The only way to find out if blood pressure is high is to measure it. It is recommended that adults have their blood pressure measured regularly, to detect high blood pressure before any

damage is done. If your blood pressure is normal and you have no other factors that increase your risk of developing heart and blood vessel disease, the Heart Foundation recommends a blood pressure check every one to two years. If your blood pressure is high, or you have other factors that increase your risk of heart and blood vessel disease, more frequent checks are recommended. Ask a doctor for advice.

## Measuring blood pressure

Blood pressure is usually measured by wrapping an inflatable pressure cuff around the upper arm. The cuff is connected to a pressure-measuring device and the entire instrument is called a sphygmomanometer. Sphygmomanometers have traditionally measured blood pressure against a column of mercury (mmHg), but nowadays electronic sphygmomanometers are also available and some are suitable for home use.

Blood pressure is always recorded as two numbers, written one on top of the other (e.g., 120/80 mmHg):

- The top number represents systolic blood pressure – the pressure inside arteries when the heart beats
- The bottom number represents diastolic blood pressure – the pressure inside arteries as the heart relaxes between beats.

## Who is at risk?

Our lifestyle can significantly affect our blood pressure and also the health of our heart and blood vessels.

Lifestyle factors that can contribute to high blood pressure and to heart and blood vessel disease include:

- Too much salt in diet
- Too much fat in diet
- Being overweight
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Not enough physical exercise
- Smoking
- Stress.

The risks of high blood pressure and heart and blood vessel disease increase with age and are also higher for people who:

- Have a family history of hypertension
- Have certain medical conditions (e.g., diabetes, high cholesterol, sleep apnoea)
- Take certain medicines (e.g., oral contraceptives).

## Self care

A healthy lifestyle is very important to help prevent or control high blood pressure and to reduce other risk factors for heart and blood vessel disease.

- Eat a healthy, balanced diet, with lots of vegetables, fruits, legumes and grain-based foods.

- Limit or avoid highly salted foods and adding salt to food. Use other flavourings in place of salt (e.g., herbs, spices, vinegar, lemon juice, onion, garlic).
- Limit foods high in fats, especially saturated and trans fats. Have moderate amounts of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats.
- Keep to a healthy body weight.
- Limit alcohol to no more than two standard drinks per day.
- Don't smoke.
- Exercise regularly. The Heart Foundation recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise on all or most days of the week (some types of exercises should be avoided by people with high blood pressure – check with your doctor).
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to manage stress.

## Medicines

Medicines can help to control, but cannot cure high blood pressure. A number of different types of blood pressure medicines are available that work in different ways, allowing many treatment options. As blood pressure medicines often need to be taken long-term, it is important to find a medicine or combination of medicines that suits you.

## Important

Consult a doctor promptly if you have:

- Diastolic blood pressure consistently over 90 mmHg or systolic blood pressure consistently over 140 mmHg
  - Shortness of breath
  - Palpitations (irregular heart beat)
  - Blurred vision
  - Dizziness
  - Repeated nose bleeds
  - Repeated or prolonged headaches.
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- Always take your blood pressure medicine regularly according to directions.
  - Never reduce or stop blood pressure medicine without first consulting your doctor or pharmacist.
  - Consult your doctor or pharmacist about problems or side effects – if necessary, your doctor can prescribe a different medicine for you.
  - Check with your pharmacist or doctor before using any other medicines (including complementary medicines), as some medicines can interfere with blood pressure control (e.g., non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and some 'cold and flu' medicines).

## For more information

### **MedicAlert**

Phone: 1800 88 22 22  
www.medicalert.org.au

### **Australian absolute cardiovascular disease risk calculator**

Website: www.cvdcheck.org.au

### **Heart Foundation of Australia**

Phone: 1300 36 27 87  
Website: www.heartfoundation.org.au

### **Building a Healthy Active Australia**

Website: www.healthyactive.gov.au

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222  
Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)  
Website: www.nps.org.au

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

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Your Self Care Pharmacy: