

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE/HYPERTENSION



■ WHAT IS HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

Blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of arteries. Your heart beats about 60 to 80 times a minute under normal conditions. Your blood pressure rises on contractions and falls when your heart relaxes between beats. Blood pressure changes throughout the day. However, when blood pressure remains high over time, it is called high blood pressure or hypertension. High blood pressure is a chronic problem that

can be treated, but not cured. It is often called the silent killer because many times there are no symptoms.

■ HOW IS BLOOD PRESSURE MEASURED?

Blood pressure is described as two numbers - the systolic pressure (the top number) measures the pressure as the heart beats. This number is over the diastolic pressure as the heart relaxes between beats. A consistent blood pressure of 140/90 mm Hg or higher is considered high blood pressure. Both numbers in a blood pressure test are important.

The categories of blood pressure in adults include:

- **Normal** - Systolic less than 120 mm Hg - Diastolic less than 80 mm Hg
- **Pre-Hypertension** - Systolic 120 - 139 - Diastolic 80 - 89
- **Stage 1 Hypertension** - Systolic 140 - 159 - Diastolic 90 - 99
- **Stage 2 Hypertension** - Greater than 160 - Greater than 100

■ WHAT CAN I DO TO CONTROL MY BLOOD PRESSURE?

Have your blood pressure checked at least four times each year. Your physician may advise that it be checked even more frequently, based on your current blood pressure measurement.

Limit the amount of sodium in your diet. The American Heart Association recommends no more than 2300 mg of sodium in your diet. Check with your physician to see what he or she recommends.

Maintain an ideal body weight. As weight increases above the desired weight for your height and build, it causes your heart to have to work harder.

Participate in regular aerobic exercise. Adding 20 to 30 minutes of walking three to four times a week is a great way to stay fit. Gradually increase your walking time to 30 to 60 minutes most days of the week. Always check with your health care provider before beginning an exercise program. Using a pedometer is a good way to keep track of the distance you are walking.

Stop smoking. Smoking affects blood pressure and speeds up the development of atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries).

Limit the use of caffeine and alcohol. Caffeinated drinks and alcohol can elevate blood pressure.

Take your medication. Always follow the directions for any prescribed medication. Discuss any side-effects with your physician and never stop taking a medication without talking to your physician.

Control stress in your life. Stress can make blood pressure go up for a while and it may contribute to high blood pressure. The long-term effects of stress on blood pressure are as yet unclear.

■ OTHER RISK FACTORS THAT CAN CAUSE HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

- **Race** - African Americans develop high blood pressure more often than Caucasians.
- **Heredity** - High blood pressure seems to run in families.
- **Age** - In general, the older you get, the greater your chance of developing high blood pressure.