

Why we call high blood pressure the silent killer

We call high blood pressure (also known as hypertension) the silent killer because a person can have high blood pressure and not even know it. Most people with high blood pressure feel fine because high blood pressure doesn't make a person feel or look sick.

High blood pressure makes your heart work harder than it should. This can damage your arteries and cause disease in other organs of your body, such as your kidneys. Controlling your blood pressure can help to keep you from having a stroke, heart attack, and kidney failure.

What do the numbers mean?

Every time your heart beats, it pumps blood through large arteries to the rest of your body. The amount of force it takes to get the blood moving through the arteries is blood pressure.

We measure blood pressure using two numbers. The first number is systolic pressure. It measures the pressure when your heart beats. The second number is diastolic pressure. It measures the pressure while your heart is resting between beats. You will see the numbers expressed like this: 120/80 with the systolic number first, followed by the diastolic number.

Do I have high blood pressure?

It's important to have regular check ups so your doctor or nurse can read your blood pressure. If your blood pressure is 140/90 or higher at two or more checkups, your doctor might ask you to start checking your blood pressure at home.

Here are some blood pressure goals to aim for. Your goal might be different. You and your doctor can work together to decide what blood pressure numbers are best for you.

Blood Pressure Goals	Systolic	Diastolic
For most people	Lower than 140	Lower than 90
People at higher risk for heart attack and stroke, including those with heart disease, chronic kidney disease, heart failure	Lower than 130	Lower than 80

Note: Even if only one of your numbers is higher than your goal, it means your blood pressure is too high.

What puts me at risk for high blood pressure?

There are some risks factors you CAN'T control. These include:

- Age – your risk goes up as you get older.
- Gender – before age 55, men are at higher risk than women are. After menopause, a woman's risk also goes up.

- Family history – high blood pressure runs in some families
- Race – African-Americans are at a higher risk.
- Diabetes – having diabetes puts you at a higher risk.

Risk factors you CAN control include:

- Using tobacco
- Being overweight
- Not getting enough exercise
- Having high cholesterol
- Eating diet high in saturated fat and salt

What can I do to control my blood pressure?

Your choices and actions make a big difference in getting your blood pressure under control. However, changing habits can be hard. You might not be able to make all the changes you want to all at the same time.

Here are some steps you can take to lower your blood pressure. Ask your doctor for help in picking one or two to start. Then add others when you can. People who make these changes, along with starting on medicine, usually start to see a difference in their blood pressure readings right away.

- ☐ Quit tobacco if you use it.
- ☐ Keep a healthy weight. If you need to lose weight, do it slowly. Losing even 10 pounds can make a big difference in lowering your blood pressure.
- ☐ Be more physically active. Try to get at least 30 minutes of activity on most days. This can lower your blood pressure by several points.
- ☐ Eat a healthy diet. Choose fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, and nonfat dairy.
- ☐ Cut down on salt. Limit yourself to less than 2,400 mg of salt and sodium a day.
- ☐ If you drink alcohol, limit yourself to 2 drinks a day for men, and 1 drink a day for women.

How often should I see my doctor?

Once your blood pressure is under control, have it checked every 6 to 12 months by someone on your health care team. If you have other medical conditions, your doctor might want to see you more often.

Medicine for high blood pressure

You and your doctor might decide to use medicine to control your blood pressure if:

- You have not been able to get your blood pressure under control by making changes to your diet and exercise.
- You have other major risk factors for heart attacks or stroke, such as diabetes.

Many people need more than one medicine to help keep their blood pressure under control. Your doctor will work with you to find the best medicines for you. Although medicine can help control your blood pressure, it can't cure it. People who start taking medicine for high blood pressure usually need to take it for the rest of their lives.

Which medicines help with blood pressure?

Your doctor will most likely prescribe one or more of the medicines listed below. These medicines will lower your risk of having heart attacks and strokes.

- A low dose diuretic (or water pill) lowers blood pressure by getting rid of extra sodium in your body.

- An ACE inhibitor lowers blood pressure by preventing the constriction of blood vessels.
- A calcium channel blocker lowers blood pressure by relaxing the muscles in your arteries.

How do I take my medicine?

Take your medicine exactly as your doctor prescribed. Even if your blood pressure is controlled, you must continue taking your medicine every day. No matter how good you feel, you need your medicine to keep your blood pressure under control.

Don't stop taking your blood pressure medicine unless your doctor tells you to stop. Don't skip a day, or take less than you're supposed to. If you have side effects or other problems or concerns with your medicine, ask your health care team for help. Don't stop taking your medicine on your own.

Resources: Where can I get more information?

- The Quit For Life® Program offers programs to help you quit tobacco. These programs are available to qualifying Kaiser Foundation Health Plan of Washington members as part of their coverage agreement. For more information or to register call 1-800-462-5327.
- Visit the Health and Wellness Resources at kp.org/wa.

High Blood Pressure Basics

- What the numbers mean
- How high blood pressure affects you
- How to lower your risks