

## Dealing With High Blood Pressure

An estimated one in three Americans has high blood pressure, an ailment that increases the risk of heart disease and stroke, the first- and third-leading causes of death in the United States. High blood pressure, or hypertension, makes the heart work too hard and causes the walls of the arteries to harden. Once it develops, it usually lasts a lifetime, but it is possible to control and prevent high blood pressure by understanding the effects, controlling diet and taking steps to improve overall health.

### Effects of High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure affects many important organs in your body:

- **Arteries:** High blood pressure causes the walls of the arteries to harden, especially as people age. This, in turn, causes the heart to work harder to pump blood.
- **Heart:** The restricted flow of blood caused by high blood pressure can limit the amount of oxygen that gets to the heart. This can cause chest pains or angina. Severely restricted or blocked arteries can cause a heart attack. In more serious cases, high blood pressure contributes to congestive heart failure, where the heart is unable to pump enough blood to the body.
- **Brain:** Very high blood pressure can cause weak blood vessels in the brain to break and bleed into the surrounding brain tissue. This can cause a stroke.
- **Kidneys:** As high blood pressure narrows blood vessels and thickens their walls, the kidneys are unable to filter as much waste out of the blood. This can cause the kidneys to fail altogether, requiring dialysis or a kidney transplant.
- **Eyes:** High blood pressure can also cause blood vessels in the eyes to burst. This can cause blurred vision or blindness.

If you have a new health insurance plan or insurance policy beginning on or after Sept. 23, 2010, blood pressure screenings for all adults and children must be covered under the Affordable Care Act, without your having to pay a co-payment or co-insurance or meet your deductible. This applies only when these services are delivered by a network provider, and some other restrictions may apply.

### Treatment with Proper Diet

Fortunately, most people can control or prevent high blood pressure with a healthy diet:

- **The DASH Eating Plan:** A clinical study called Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension tested the effects of diet on blood pressure. Results showed that a diet emphasizing fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products and one that is low in fat and cholesterol can lower blood pressure. This diet also includes whole grains, poultry, fish and nuts and reduces fat, red meat and sweets.
- **Reduce sodium:** Similar studies also show that reducing sodium in your diet lowers blood pressure. Try to reduce the amount of salt in your diet by limiting canned or processed foods, refraining from

salting your food with table salt, and shopping for special reduced-sodium food products and seasonings.

## Treatment Through Healthy Living

In addition to eating healthy, you can reduce high blood pressure by improving your lifestyle:

- **Exercise:** Physical activity is perhaps the most important step to preventing high blood pressure. Studies show that adults who exercise 30 minutes to an hour each day reduce their risk for a myriad of health problems, including high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.
- **Weight control:** Being overweight increases the risk for high blood pressure. Losing even a little weight can help, especially for those who already have hypertension.
- **Quit smoking:** Smoking does not cause high blood pressure, but it does harden the arteries and injures blood vessel walls. Quitting can reduce the risk of heart attack in a year.
- **Drink alcohol in moderation:** Alcohol can raise blood pressure and contribute to other factors that cause high blood pressure, like weight gain. Adults should reduce the amount of alcohol they drink to one to two drinks a day.
- **Manage stress:** The long-term effects of stress are not known, but it does increase hypertension in the short term and is believed to be a risk factor for many other heart-related diseases. Stress management can help you prevent other causes of hypertension like overeating, smoking and alcohol abuse.

## Resources

- American Heart Association: [www.heart.org](http://www.heart.org)
- American Society of Hypertension: [www.ash-us.org](http://www.ash-us.org)
- American Stroke Association: [www.strokeassociation.org](http://www.strokeassociation.org)
- National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute: [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)
- HealthCare.gov: [www.healthcare.gov](http://www.healthcare.gov)

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