

What Is High Blood Pressure?

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is a chronic condition that occurs when the pressure of the blood flowing through the arteries is above normal levels. When that happens, the heart must work harder to circulate the blood through the body which causes stress on the arteries.

If high blood pressure is left untreated, the continuing stress on the heart and arteries can contribute to a number of serious and life-threatening health problems such as stroke, heart attack, kidney failure, eye damage, congestive heart failure and atherosclerosis (fatty buildup in the arteries).

High blood pressure can be controlled but not cured.

How Common Is High Blood Pressure?

The statistics are alarming: one in four adults has high blood pressure.

To put it in a broader context, approximately 50-65 million people in the United States have high blood pressure and approximately one third of those people don't even know it. That is why high blood pressure is referred to as the "silent killer" because it most often occurs without any symptoms.

New Findings:

Based on recent clinical studies, there is a major shift in the recommendations for diagnosing and treating high blood pressure in people over 50. Doctors are now focusing on the importance of measuring systolic blood pressure, the top number, which better identifies people with high blood pressure. The bottom number is called diastolic. In most people, systolic blood pressure rises with age and diastolic blood pressure levels off after age 50 for about 10 years and then remains the same or falls later in life. Optimal blood pressure is considered less than 120/80.

What Causes High Blood Pressure?

In 90-95% of all cases, the cause of hypertension is unknown. Listed below are several risk factors that cannot be controlled but contribute to high blood pressure. They are:

Race and Sex: African Americans are more likely to develop high blood pressure than

Caucasians and women are slightly more susceptible than men.

Heredity: High blood pressure can run in families.

Age: High blood pressure occurs most often in people over 35. But remember, the older you get, the higher your risk.

Obesity: People who weigh 30% or more over their ideal body weight have a much higher risk of hypertension.

Salt: A diet high in sodium can lead to high blood pressure.

Alcohol: Heavy and regular use of alcohol can increase blood pressure.

Exercise: An inactive lifestyle can contribute to being overweight and lead to high blood pressure.

Stress: A stressful lifestyle can contribute to the disease.

Complications From High Blood Pressure:

Stroke: One of the more serious health problems that often results from uncontrolled high blood pressure is a stroke. This occurs

when a blood vessel in the brain gets clogged or bursts, which can result in paralysis or death.

Congestive Heart Failure: This condition occurs when the heart cannot pump enough blood to meet the needs of the body's other organs. Although the heart can continue to work, this condition causes a person to develop shortness of breath and swelling throughout the body.

Heart Attack: A person with hypertension is three times more likely to develop coronary artery disease, which can lead to a heart attack. A heart attack occurs when the blood supply to part of the heart muscle is severely reduced or stopped. If the blood supply is cut off for a prolonged period of time, the muscle can suffer irreversible injury or die. The result for the individual can be disability or death.

There are so many other ways that hypertension causes or contributes to health problems. A person with unmanaged hypertension is more susceptible to kidney failure, damage to the eyes and hardening of the arteries. The key to preventing all of these serious conditions is early diagnosis and careful management of the disease.



