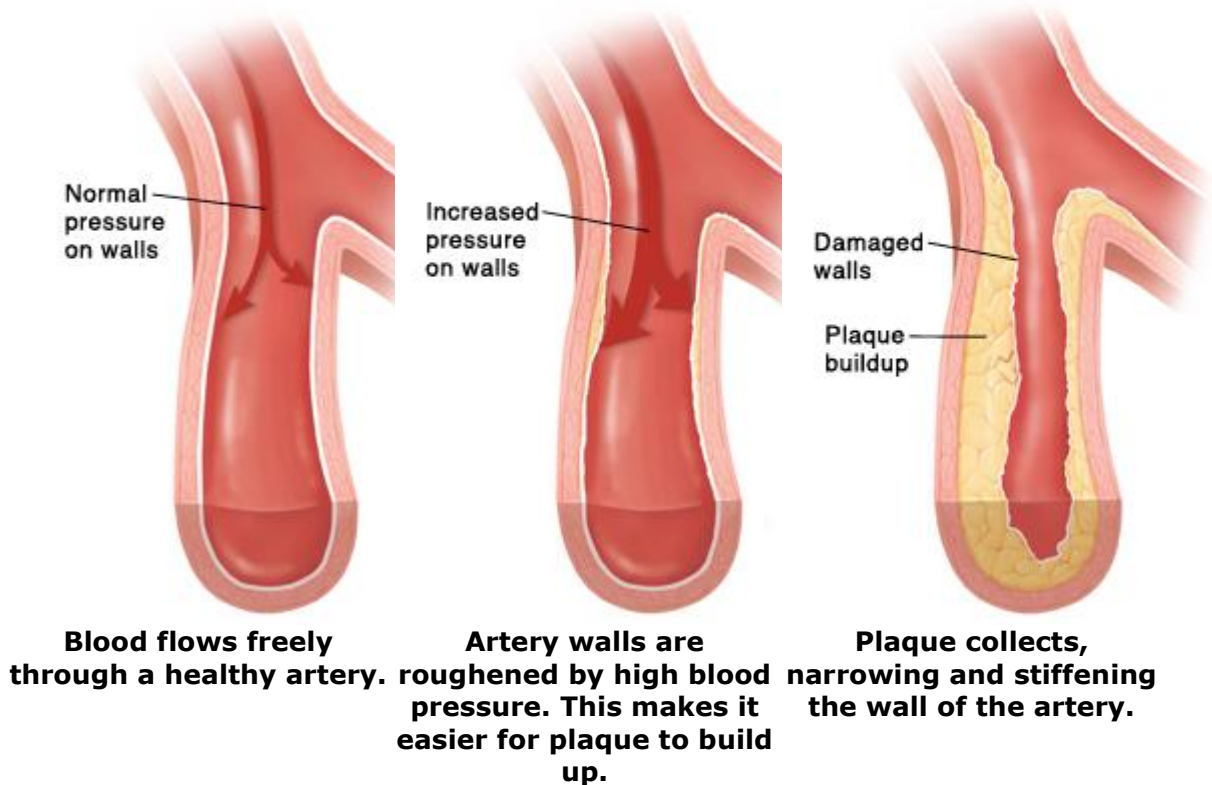


What Is High Blood Pressure?

High blood pressure (also called hypertension) is known as the “silent killer.” This is because most of the time it doesn’t cause symptoms. In fact, many people don’t know they have it until other problems develop. In most cases, high blood pressure can’t be cured. It’s a disease that requires lifelong treatment. The good news is that it CAN be managed.



Understanding Blood Pressure

The circulatory system is made up of the heart and blood vessels that carry blood through the body. Your heart is the pump for this system. With each heartbeat (contraction), the heart sends blood out through large blood vessels called arteries. Blood pressure is a measure of how hard the moving blood pushes against the walls of the arteries.

High Blood Pressure Can Harm Your Health

High blood pressure makes the heart work harder to pump blood. Frequent high blood pressure can also cause changes in the artery walls. The walls thicken and become rough, which leads to a buildup of plaque (a fatty material). This can damage the arteries. It can also reduce blood flow through the artery. If blood pressure is not controlled, all these effects can lead to serious health problems. These include heart disease, heart attack (also known as acute myocardial infarction, or AMI), stroke, kidney disease, and blindness.

Measuring Blood Pressure

An example of a blood pressure measurement is 120/70 (120 over 70). The top number is the pressure of blood against the artery walls during a heartbeat (**systolic**). The bottom number is the pressure of blood against artery walls between heartbeats (**diastolic**). Talk with your health care provider to find out what your blood pressure goals should be.

Controlling Blood Pressure

If your blood pressure is too high, work with your doctor on a plan for lowering it. Below are steps you can take that will help lower your blood pressure.

- **Choose heart-healthy foods.** Eating healthier meals helps you control your blood pressure. Ask your doctor about the DASH eating plan. This plan helps reduce blood pressure by limiting the amount of sodium (salt) you have in your diet.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** Being overweight makes you more likely to have high blood pressure. Losing excess weight helps lower blood pressure.
- **Exercise regularly.** Daily exercise helps your heart and blood vessels work better and stay healthier. It can help lower your blood pressure.
- **Stop smoking.** Smoking increases blood pressure and damages blood vessels.
- **Limit alcohol.** Drinking too much alcohol can raise blood pressure. Men should have no more than 2 drinks a day. Women should have no more than 1. (A drink is equal to 1 beer, or a small glass of wine, or a shot of liquor.)
- **Control stress.** Stress makes your heart work harder and beat faster. Controlling stress helps you control your blood pressure.

Facts About High Blood Pressure

- **Feeling OK does not mean that blood pressure is under control.** Likewise, feeling bad doesn't mean it's out of control. The only way to know for sure is to check your pressure regularly.
- **Medication is only one part of controlling high blood pressure.** You also need to manage your weight, get regular exercise, and adjust your eating habits.
- **High blood pressure is usually a lifelong problem.** But it can be controlled with healthy lifestyle changes and medication.
- **Hypertension is not the same as stress.** Although stress may be a factor in high blood pressure, it's only one part of the story.
- **Blood pressure medications need to be taken every day.** Stopping suddenly may cause a dangerous increase in pressure.

High Blood Pressure and Peripheral Arterial Disease (PAD)

Blood pressure measures the force of blood against artery walls. High blood pressure (**hypertension**) can damage arteries and put you at risk for **peripheral arterial disease (PAD)**. PAD is a disease of arteries in the legs. If you have PAD, it's likely that arteries in other parts of your body are diseased, too. That puts you at high risk for heart attack and other heart diseases. Read on to learn how high blood pressure can lead to PAD and affect your health.

How Can High Blood Pressure Lead to Peripheral Arterial Disease?

High blood pressure promotes plaque formation. Plaque is a waxy material made up of cholesterol and other particles that can build up in artery walls. When there is too much plaque, your arteries can become narrowed and restrict blood flow. If high blood pressure isn't controlled, this makes it more likely for you to develop PAD and other heart problems. But high blood pressure can be controlled with exercise, weight loss, dietary changes, and medication.

What Happens If Blood Pressure Isn't Controlled?

- For every 20 mmHg systolic (top number) or 10 mmHg diastolic (bottom number) increase in your blood pressure, your risk for death from heart disease or stroke doubles.
- If you have diabetes, high blood pressure increases your risk for diabetes complications.

What Happens If Blood Pressure Is Controlled?

Lowering your blood pressure and keeping it low can:

- Reduce your risk for stroke
- Reduce your risk for heart attack
- Reduce your risk for dying of heart disease
- Reduce your risk for diabetes complications

