

## Hypertension: Understanding a Silent Killer

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Chronically high blood pressure — hypertension — can cause damage to your blood vessels and internal organs including your heart. Currently affecting 1 in 3 adults in the United States, hypertension has been called a silent threat because the condition itself has no symptoms. However, the effect on your body can be life-threatening over time. Engaging in healthy lifestyle behaviors at all stages of life, regardless of race or ethnicity, can help keep your risk for hypertension in check.

### What You Can Do about High Blood Pressure

The first thing you can do is visit your doctor for routine checkups. Even though high blood pressure rarely shows symptoms, the abnormal force of blood through the arteries, over time, can cause damage to your internal organs, including your heart, blood vessels and kidneys. Thus, chronic hypertension increases the risk for cardiovascular disease and other serious health issues.

Know your blood pressure and have it monitored. Regular physicals will determine if your blood pressure is within the healthy limits. A blood pressure of less than 120 over 80 is considered healthy. While it is important to keep both numbers from escalating, the top number, known as systolic pressure, indicates the severity of your high blood pressure. If necessary, your doctor will discuss treatment options and supportive health care. Meanwhile, a registered dietitian nutritionist can provide you with dietary strategies to help lower your blood pressure.

### Who You Are Matters

Age and ethnicity can be determining factors. High blood pressure tends to increase with age, generally affecting adults age 50 and older. However, people with diabetes and individuals who are overweight also are at increased risk for developing hypertension. In a 1999–2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey of adults age 18 and over, non-Hispanic black Americans were more likely to develop pre-hypertension and hypertension than non-Hispanic whites and Mexican Americans. While age and ethnicity are contributing factors, anyone can be at risk.

### Eat to Reduce Risk of Hypertension

Individuals at risk of high blood pressure may be advised to follow the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension diet to lower their blood pressure. The DASH diet is rich in fruits and vegetables and low in fat and sodium. Studies show that the DASH diet can lower your blood pressure. While the diet benefited participants of all ages, the highest improvements were in middle-aged individuals — typically an age when rates of cardiovascular disease are greatly increased.

Since most Americans are getting too much sodium from the foods they eat, it's important to learn ways to reduce it. Remember, it's important to keep up with regular physicals, especially if you are overweight or have diabetes, because these factors can increase your risk for high blood pressure. Consider a diet that is high in fruits and vegetables and low in fat and sodium. Simply lowering sodium intake may have a significant impact on blood pressure and thus improve overall health.

