

High Blood Pressure / Hypertension: Symptoms, Causes, Diagnosis, Treatment and Prevention

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High blood pressure, or hypertension, happens when the pressure of blood against the walls of the blood vessels stays higher than it should be. It often causes no obvious symptoms, but over time it can raise the risk of heart disease, heart attack, stroke, chronic kidney disease, and vascular dementia.

What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is shown as two numbers, such as 130/80.

In the UK, it is generally considered high if it is 140/90 or above when measured by a healthcare professional, or 135/85 or above when measured at home.

A single high reading does not always mean long-term hypertension. Repeat checks, home monitoring, or a 24-hour monitor may be used to confirm whether readings stay high over time.

Symptoms of high blood pressure

High blood pressure usually does not cause symptoms, which is why it is often described as a silent condition.

The most reliable way to know if you have it is to have your blood pressure checked.

- Headaches
- Blurred vision
- Chest pain

Because these symptoms are not specific, hypertension can be missed or confused with other health problems. Long-term uncontrolled blood pressure can also raise the risk of conditions linked to memory and thinking, including dementia.

When to get medical help

Get help from NHS 111 if you often have headaches or blurred vision, if you have chest pain that comes and goes, or if you have other symptoms you are worried could be caused by high blood pressure.

Call 999 straight away if chest pain or discomfort does not go away, if pain spreads to the arm, neck, jaw, stomach, or back, or if chest pain happens with sweating, nausea, light-headedness, or shortness of breath. These can be signs of a heart attack.

What causes high blood pressure?

High blood pressure usually develops over time. It can be linked to lifestyle, family history, age, and other medical conditions. Physical inactivity, an unhealthy diet, tobacco use, excess alcohol,

diabetes, and obesity all raise the risk.

Main risk factors

- Older age
- Family history of high blood pressure
- Unhealthy diet, especially one high in salt
- Being overweight or having obesity
- Smoking or other tobacco use
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Long-term stress
- Physical inactivity
- Diabetes

NHS guidance also notes higher risk in people from Black African, Black Caribbean, or South Asian ethnic backgrounds.

How high blood pressure is diagnosed

A blood pressure check is done with a cuff around the upper arm. If the first reading is high, you may be asked to repeat it at home, return later for another reading, or wear a portable monitor that takes readings over 24 hours.

Regular checking matters because high blood pressure often has no symptoms. NHS advice says people aged 40 or over should have it checked if they have not had a reading in more than 5 years, and many pharmacies in England offer free checks for over-40s.

Treatment options for high blood pressure

Treatment usually involves a combination of lifestyle changes and, for some people, medicines. Some people can improve control with lifestyle steps alone, while others need medication as well.

Lifestyle treatment

- Eating a healthy, balanced diet
- Being physically active
- Aiming for at least 150 minutes of exercise a week
- Losing weight if overweight
- Reducing salt
- Not smoking
- Reducing alcohol
- Limiting excess caffeine

Medicines

A GP will usually prescribe medicine if your blood pressure is very high, if you are at higher risk of complications such as heart attack or stroke, or if it stays high after lifestyle changes. Most blood pressure medicines are tablets taken once a day, and some people need more than one medicine to keep it under control.

Can high blood pressure be prevented?

In many cases, prevention focuses on healthy eating, keeping to a healthier weight, exercising regularly, not smoking, and cutting down on salt and excess alcohol.

Because high blood pressure is closely linked with stroke, heart disease, and chronic kidney disease, prevention can make a meaningful difference to long-term health.

Living with high blood pressure

Many people live well with hypertension, but it usually needs ongoing monitoring. That may mean regular blood pressure checks, medication reviews, and support with diet, activity, smoking, alcohol, and weight management.

Lowering blood pressure even a small amount can help reduce the risk of future problems.

Questions to ask your doctor

- Is my blood pressure consistently high or does it need more monitoring?
- Should I check my blood pressure at home?
- What should my target blood pressure be?
- Do I need medicine, or should I try lifestyle changes first?
- Which changes would make the biggest difference for me?
- How often should I have my blood pressure checked?
- What warning signs should I treat as urgent?

Final thought

High blood pressure is common and often silent, but it is also one of the most manageable long-term risk factors. Regular checks, earlier treatment, and consistent lifestyle changes can all lower the risk of serious complications.

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