

HYPERTENSION AND YOUR HEALTH

Defining blood pressure

In simple terms, blood pressure (BP) is the force with which the blood is pushing against the blood vessel walls, and is measured in 'millimeters of mercury' (mmHg). Your blood pressure reading is made up of two numbers; the systolic reading (the top number) indicates the highest level your blood pressure reaches when your heart is beating. The diastolic reading (bottom number) records the lowest pressure reached when your heart is resting between beats.

A reading of 120 / 80 mm Hg is classified as normal; any reading, above the normal range (top or bottom number) will fall under one of the four stages of hypertension (high blood pressure):

- Over 120/80 = Elevated (prehypertension - more likely to develop hypertension)
- Over 130/80 = Stage 1 hypertension
- Over 140/90 = Stage 2 hypertension
- Over 180/120 = Severe hypertension (**please see a doctor immediately**)

How is high blood pressure diagnosed?

The finding of abnormal BP reading at two or more occasions is enough to make the diagnosis of hypertension. Regularly measuring your blood pressure, particularly if you have a family history of hypertension, is vital to make sure your heart is healthy.

Effects of high blood pressure

As blood pressure increases, the heart and blood vessels work harder to push blood to the rest of the body, putting strain on the heart and making its efforts less efficient. Over time, the constant pressure causes damage to the artery walls and can result in narrowing of the arteries as plaque builds up within them. A number of serious health conditions can result including heart attack, heart failure and stroke.

Managing high blood pressure

In addition to prescribed medication for more severe cases, there are several lifestyle changes that you can make to reduce your blood pressure:

1. **Manage your stress levels:** With the help of relaxation techniques and support from your friends and family, your stress levels can decrease significantly. Reducing stress and anxiety can prevent related episodes of elevated blood pressure.
2. **Lose excess weight:** If you're overweight or obese, losing even a small amount weight can significantly help in lowering blood pressure.
3. **Change your dietary habits:** Cut back on your salt and increase your potassium intake. The recommended daily salt limit for healthy adults is 2,300mg (1tsp of salt), while those with high blood pressure should limit their daily intake to 1500mg. Eating foods including bananas, leafy greens, potatoes, and some dried fruits including dates and raisins is a great way to up your potassium intake. Limiting or avoiding fatty, fried or processed foods is also a positive step in keeping your blood pressure in check.
4. **Adopt the DASH diet:** Studies have shown that following the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan lowers blood pressure. The DASH diet has been developed to lower blood pressure without medication by focusing on the right portion sizes of balanced, nutrient-rich food and by reducing salt intake. The diet can also help prevent osteoporosis, cancer, heart disease, stroke and diabetes.
5. **Get exercising:** Regular aerobic activity improves blood vessel flexibility, helps to create new vessels, and increases blood flow. Try to be active for

at least 150 minutes a week, or 30 minutes a day. Walking, jogging and swimming are all good forms of exercise.

6. **Reduce alcohol consumption:** If you do consume alcohol, cutting back can benefit your blood pressure. Men should have no more than two alcoholic beverages a day and women just one; remember that quantities will vary according to the type of beverage.

General outlook

In Uganda, treatment of hypertension is the most common reason for office visits and for the use of chronic prescription medications. In addition, at least half of hypertensive individuals do not have adequate blood pressure control which leads to complications of hypertension and end organ damage such as kidney, eyes, heart and brain. Additionally, most patients will need more than one medication to control their BP readings.”

Other lifestyle changes that may also help to lower your blood pressure include giving up smoking, cutting back on caffeine, and making sure you get enough sleep.

Depending on your stage of hypertension, your physician will prescribe the appropriate medication and suggest lifestyle changes.

Early detection of high blood pressure

High blood pressure can often go undetected, Early detection of hypertension will ensure better outcomes due to early commencement of treatment before organ damage.

Therefore, unless otherwise directed by your physician, you should get your blood pressure checked every 2 years from the age of 20.

If hypertension runs in your family, make sure you are regularly monitoring your blood pressure, atleast once every 3 months as well as making the recommended lifestyle changes in order to protect your heart and arteries.