

Women's *Heart Advantage*

Heart Healthy Information: High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is a common problem for women. More than half of all women over age 55 have high blood pressure.

High blood pressure is called the “silent killer” because it usually does not cause warning symptoms. High blood pressure is dangerous because it makes the heart work too hard. Over time it hurts your heart, blood vessels, kidneys, brain and eyes. Even slightly high levels increase your risk for these problems. The good news is that you can do something to manage high blood pressure and avoid many serious problems.

What is blood pressure?

As blood is pumped from your heart through your body, the blood puts pressure against the blood vessel walls. Your blood pressure measures this pressure. When the number goes above a certain point, it is called high blood pressure. Blood pressure is expressed as two numbers, such as 110/70. The top number is the systolic blood pressure, and it is created by the pressure in the arteries when the heart beats. The bottom number or diastolic blood pressure, is the pressure in between heartbeats.

Blood pressure changes a lot. Your doctor may check it on several different days before deciding if it is too high. Blood pressure is considered “high” when it stays above normal levels over time.

Blood pressure: How high is too high?

The recommended blood pressure is less than 120/80. Therefore, your blood pressure is too high if your top number (systolic blood pressure) is 120 or higher OR if your bottom number (diastolic pressure) is 80 or higher. Treatment is recommended even if only one of the numbers is too high.

What are the risk factors that contribute to high blood pressure?

The cause of high blood pressure is unknown for most people, however, we do know that certain things make a person more likely to develop high blood pressure. Some of these things you have control over, such as eating too much salt or being overweight. Not exercising and drinking too much alcohol can also increase your chances for high blood pressure.

There are also some things you cannot change such as family history, high blood pressure, racial background and gender.

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Women's HeartAdvantage is an educational program sponsored by the doctors, nurses and hospitals of Sutter Health to raise awareness of women's heart disease, risk factors, early detection, and treatment. This information is provided to help you understand how certain factors can affect your chances for heart disease and how to help control them. For more information, visit www.hearts.sutterhealth.org.

High blood pressure is also more common in African American women than it is in white women. Men have a greater risk up until age 55. After age 74, women are more likely than men to have high blood pressure.

Can high blood pressure be prevented?

You can help to manage high blood pressure by doing the following:

- Managing your weight or losing weight if you are overweight
- Exercising regularly — 30 minutes a day for most days of the week
- Limiting salt (sodium) to less than 2,400 mg a day (1 teaspoon of salt)
- Eating more fruits and vegetables, and low fat or nonfat dairy products
- Limiting amounts of saturated fat and total fat. Eat foods rich in potassium
- Drinking no more than one alcoholic drink a day (women)
- Getting regular blood pressure checks if you are taking birth control pills, estrogen or hormone therapy

What if I need medication to control my blood pressure?

If your blood pressure remains high even after you make changes in your lifestyle such as diet and exercise, your doctor will probably order medicine. However, changes in your life will help the medicine work better and may reduce the amount of medicine that you need.

A reminder:

It's important to take medication exactly as your doctor has ordered. Make sure you understand how much medicine you should take each day and how often before you leave your doctor's office. Let your doctor know if you notice any side effects.



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