

# Making Sense of BLOOD PRESSURE



Knowing the facts may save your life

by nancy nichols

Learning the facts about blood pressure could be one of the most important things you do for your health. You can prevent or manage high blood pressure through healthy habits and, if necessary, by taking medication (as directed by your doctor).

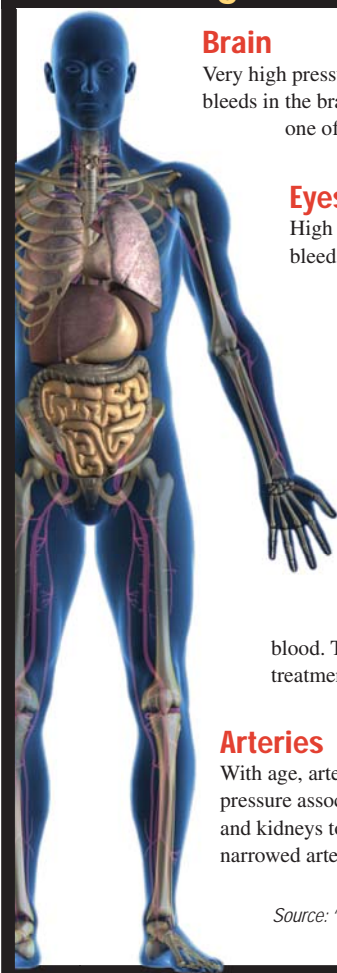
One in three adults in the United States has high blood pressure, yet the condition usually has no symptoms. You can have it for years without knowing it, so it's important to have your blood pressure checked (see page 8) and follow any treatment your doctor recommends.

Category	Systolic (top number)		Diastolic (bottom number)
Normal	Less than 120	and	Less than 80
Prehypertension	120-139	or	80-89
High Blood Pressure (hypertension) - Stage 1	140-159	or	90-99
High Blood Pressure (hypertension) - Stage 2	160 or higher	or	100 or higher

Blood pressure readings are a ratio of the maximum, or systolic, pressure (as the heart pushes the blood out to the body) written over the minimum, or diastolic, pressure (as the heart begins to fill with blood). For example, 114/72 or 146/94.

Source: National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov).

## Effect of high blood pressure on your body



### Brain

Very high pressure can break a weakened blood vessel, which then bleeds in the brain and can cause a stroke. A blood clot blocking one of the narrowed arteries can also cause a stroke.

### Eyes

High pressure can cause blood vessels to burst or bleed, causing vision impairment or blindness.

### Heart

The arteries bring oxygen-carrying blood to the heart muscle. If the heart cannot get enough oxygen, chest pain can occur. If blood flow is blocked, a heart attack results. High blood pressure can also cause congestive heart failure.

### Kidneys

Over time, high pressure can narrow and thicken blood vessels in the kidneys. The kidneys filter less fluid, and waste builds up in the blood. The kidneys may fail altogether, requiring medical treatment (dialysis) or a kidney transplant.

### Arteries

With age, arteries throughout the body "harden." High blood pressure associated with these "stiffer" arteries causes the heart and kidneys to work harder. In addition, a blood clot blocking a narrowed artery can cause a heart attack or stroke.

Source: "Your Guide to Lowering High Blood Pressure," National Heart Lung and Blood Institute.

Many risk factors for high blood pressure are things you **CAN** control:

- Being overweight or obese.
- Not being physically active.
- Using tobacco.
- Too much salt (sodium) in your diet.
- Too little potassium in your diet.
- Too little vitamin D in your diet. Researchers suspect a connection, though more studies are needed to determine vitamin D's exact role in blood pressure.
- Drinking too much alcohol.
- Stress.
- Certain chronic conditions. High cholesterol, diabetes, kidney disease and sleep apnea may contribute to high blood pressure.

Some risk factors you **CANNOT** control:

- Age. The risk of high blood pressure increases as you age.
- Race. High blood pressure is particularly common among blacks, often developing at an earlier age than it does in whites.
- Family history. High blood pressure tends to run in families.

Source: Mayo Clinic, [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com).

