

let's talk about

## High Blood Pressure and Stroke

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, means that the force of blood flowing through the blood vessels is consistently too high. Uncontrolled high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart attack, heart failure or kidney failure.

Two numbers represent blood pressure. The upper (systolic) number is the pressure in your arteries when your heart beats. The lower (diastolic) number is the pressure while your heart rests between beats. The systolic number is always listed first. Blood pressure is measured in millimeters of mercury (mm Hg).

BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORY	SYSTOLIC mm Hg (top/upper number)		DIASTOLIC mm Hg (bottom/lower number)
NORMAL	LESS THAN 120	and	LESS THAN 80
ELEVATED	120–129	and	LESS THAN 80
STAGE 1 HYPERTENSION (High Blood Pressure)	130–139	or	80–89
STAGE 2 HYPERTENSION (High Blood Pressure)	140 OR HIGHER	or	90 OR HIGHER
SEVERE HYPERTENSION (If you don't have symptoms*, call your health care professional.)	HIGHER THAN 180	and/ or	HIGHER THAN 120
HYPERTENSIVE EMERGENCY (If you have any of these symptoms*, call 911.)	HIGHER THAN 180	and/ or	HIGHER THAN 120

\*symptoms: chest pain, shortness of breath, back pain, numbness, weakness, change in vision or difficulty speaking

Normal blood pressure is below 120/80 mm Hg. The diagnosis of high blood pressure has different stages escalating in seriousness. These stages range from **elevated** — for adults, that's a systolic pressure from 120 to 129 but a normal diastolic pressure — to a **hypertensive emergency**, when readings exceed 180/120 mm Hg and symptoms such as chest pain, shortness of breath, back pain, numbness, weakness, change in vision or difficulty speaking. A hypertensive emergency requires immediate medical attention.

### How does high blood pressure increase stroke risk?

High blood pressure adds to your heart's workload and damages your arteries and organs over time. Compared with people whose blood pressure is normal, people with high blood pressure are more likely to have a stroke.

Damaged arteries can clog more easily. About 87% of strokes occur when a blood vessel feeding the brain gets blocked, usually by a clot. This is an ischemic stroke.

Blood vessels also can be weaker due to aging and the constant strain of high blood pressure. Over time, the vessels no longer hold up to the pressure and rupture. This is a hemorrhagic stroke. About 13% of strokes are this type.

### Am I at higher risk for high blood pressure?

Various risk factors increase your chances of developing high blood pressure. Some you can improve or treat, and some you can't.

Those that can be improved or treated are:

- Cigarette smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke
- Diabetes
- Being overweight or obese
- High cholesterol
- Physical inactivity
- Unhealthy diet (high in sodium, low in potassium and drinking too much alcohol)

(continued)



**American  
Stroke  
Association.**  
A division of the  
American Heart Association.

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Factors that can't be changed or are difficult to control:

- Family history of high blood pressure
- Race/ethnicity
- Increasing age
- Gender
- Chronic kidney disease
- Obstructive sleep apnea

Socioeconomic status and psychosocial stress may also contribute to high blood pressure. These factors can affect access to basic living needs, such as healthy food, medications and health care professionals, and may limit the ability to make healthy lifestyle changes.



The only way to know your blood pressure is high is to check it regularly.

### HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1** Call 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit [stroke.org](https://stroke.org) to learn more about stroke or find local support groups.
- 2** Sign up for our monthly *Stroke Connection* e-news for stroke survivors and caregivers at [StrokeConnection.org](https://StrokeConnection.org).
- 3** Connect with others who have also had an experience with stroke by joining our Support Network at [stroke.org/SupportNetwork](https://stroke.org/SupportNetwork).

#### Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write down your questions for the next time you see your health care professional:

**What should my blood pressure be?**

**How often should my blood pressure be checked?**

#### MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit [stroke.org/LetsTalkAboutStroke](https://stroke.org/LetsTalkAboutStroke) to learn more.