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High Blood Pressure

Usually defined as having a sustained blood pressure of 140/90 mmHg.

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Blood pressure measurement has 2 parts

Systolic pressure – the blood pressure when the heart beats and blood is pumped around the body.

Diastolic pressure – the blood pressure when the heart is resting between beats.

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Recording blood pressure measurement

In a blood pressure measurement the systolic pressure is usually written first followed by the diastolic pressure.

If a doctor tells you your blood pressure, they might say you have a blood pressure of 140 over 90, this would be written 140/90 mmHg.

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Blood pressure is measured in mmHg (millimetres of mercury)

Many devices used to measure blood pressure have a column of mercury in them which rises according to the blood pressure.

Modern blood pressure measuring devices are usually electronic.

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Blood pressure is the amount of pressure exerted on the artery walls as blood moves through them.

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1 in 3 adults in Britain has high blood pressure

It is estimated that 18% of adult men and 13% of adult women have high blood pressure but aren't getting treatment for it.

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Having high blood pressure means that you are at a major risk of cardiovascular diseases such as:

- Coronary heart disease
- Stroke
- Heart attack

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There are a number of risk factors which can increase your chances of getting high blood pressure

- Age – more likely to get high blood pressure as you get older
- Family history of high blood pressure
- High fat diet
- High salt diet
- Lack of exercise
- Smoking
- Being overweight
- Stress
- Drinking too much alcohol

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Regular blood pressure checks

Adults over 40 should have their blood pressure checked at least every 5 years. If you have contributory risk factors or high blood pressure you should have your blood pressure checked more frequently.

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Causes of high blood pressure

There are 2 types of high blood pressure:

- Primary high blood pressure – no identifiable cause
- Secondary high blood pressure – has an underlying cause. May be the result of a medical condition such as kidney disease or medication that you are taking

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Blood pressure checks

One high blood pressure measurement does not necessarily mean you have high blood pressure. To be diagnosed with high blood pressure your doctor will take a number of measurements over a period of time.

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Treatment for slightly high blood pressure

If your blood pressure is slightly high and your risk of cardiovascular disease is low, your doctor may ask you to make lifestyle changes to improve your blood pressure.

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Treatment for moderately high blood pressure

If your blood pressure is moderately high (140/90mmHg or above) or your risk of developing cardiovascular disease is high you may be prescribed medication and advised on lifestyle changes

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Treatment for very high blood pressure

If your blood pressure is very high (180/110mmHg or above) you will be referred to a specialist doctor.

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Lifestyle changes to reduce high blood pressure (1)

- Take regular exercise – 30 minutes per day, 5 days a week
- Stick to alcohol limits – 21 units per week for men, 14 units per week for women.
- Eat a healthy, low fat, balanced diet.

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Lifestyle changes to reduce high blood pressure (2)

- Eat less than 6g of salt per day.
- Lose weight if you are overweight or obese
- Don't drink more than 5 cups of coffee or tea a day
- Relaxation therapies such as yoga or meditation

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Complications of high blood pressure – cardiovascular disease

If untreated, high blood pressure can cause different types of cardiovascular disease.

For example:

- **Stroke** – interruption of the blood supply to the brain
- **Heart attack** - blood supply to the heart is blocked
- **Blood clot** (thrombosis)
- **Aneurysm** – weakness in the blood vessel wall that causes the blood vessel to bulge

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Complications of high blood pressure – kidney disease

High blood pressure can damage the small blood vessels in your kidneys and stop them from working properly.

Symptoms of this include:

- Tiredness
- Swollen ankles, feet or hands.
- Shortness of breath
- Blood and/or protein in your urine
- Urinating more often, especially at night
- Itchy skin

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‘Silent Killer’

There are often no symptoms or immediate problems caused by high blood pressure.

This means that it is often only found when patients see a doctor about other problems. Regular checks are therefore vitally important.

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Half of people in the UK over the age of 75 have high blood pressure.

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There are many different medications prescribed for high blood pressure.

Some of these can have adverse side effects, which affect different patients to greater or lesser extents. Some patients will try several different forms of medication.

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Symptoms

Very high blood pressure can sometimes cause noticeable symptoms.

These include:

- Headaches
- Blurred or double vision
- Nosebleeds
- Shortness of breath

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Variability

Blood pressure varies at different times and between different people, without necessarily becoming a problem. The ideal level is considered to be around 120/80mmHg.

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Increased health risks

Even if a person's blood pressure is not defined as high, if it is above average they have a higher risk of health problems such as heart attack and stroke

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Low blood pressure

Low blood pressure, or hypotension, is rarer than high blood pressure, and is defined as pressure below 90/60mmHg.

Low blood pressure can protect against the problems caused by having high blood pressure.

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People at high risk

People with certain conditions may need medication even though their blood pressure is not considered to be very high.

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Diabetes & high blood pressure

If you have diabetes, medication to lower your blood pressure will be considered if your blood pressure is higher than 140/80mmHg

If you have complications from diabetes (eg. Kidney problems), medication will be considered if your blood pressure is higher than 130/80mmHg

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