

The Silent Killer — High Blood Pressure

What is high blood pressure?

When you have high blood pressure, or hypertension, the force of blood against your artery walls is too strong. High blood pressure can damage your arteries, heart and kidneys, and can cause hardening of the arteries (arteriosclerosis), and stroke. Hypertension is called a "silent killer" because it usually does not bring about symptoms unless it is severely high. For that reason, untreated hypertension can cause major organ damage before you know you have high blood pressure.

How is blood pressure measured?

Most of us have had our blood pressure tested by a health care provider or at a local pharmacy. During the test, a cuff is tightened around your arm and your blood pressure results are reported as two numbers: systolic and diastolic.

- The **systolic measurement** (top number) is the pressure of blood against your artery walls when the heart has just finished pumping (contracting).
- The **diastolic measurement** (bottom number) is the pressure of blood against your artery walls between heartbeats, when the heart is relaxed and filling with blood.

Your goal should be to maintain a blood pressure level of <140/90mm Hg (<130/80mm Hg if diabetes is present).

Could I have high blood pressure?

Women represent half of the 50 million Americans who have high blood pressure. Older women are particularly at risk, with more than half of all women over 55 suffering from this condition. Hypertension is also more common and more severe among African-American women than other races. Some women who use birth control pills may be at increased risk for developing high blood pressure, such as women over the age of 35 who smoke. It is important for you to know your blood pressure measurement so you can take steps to manage your blood pressure to avoid serious health problems.

Remember that hypertension is a silent killer. Usually, you will not feel any warning signs or symptoms of high blood pressure, and you will not know you have it until a health professional takes a blood pressure reading. Hypertension develops slowly and may cause serious organ damage before any symptoms occur.

What causes high blood pressure?

For most people who have high blood pressure, no known cause can be identified. This is called primary, or essential, hypertension.





Secondary hypertension is caused by certain medications or other conditions, such as pregnancy or narrowing of the kidney arteries. If the cause is corrected, blood pressure usually will return back to normal.

Several factors can increase blood pressure, including obesity, heavy alcohol use, high salt intake, and aging. A sedentary lifestyle, stress, low potassium intake, low calcium intake, and resistance to insulin may also cause blood pressure to rise.

Elevated blood pressure readings may not always mean you have high blood pressure. For some people, just being in a medical setting causes their blood pressure to rise. This is called white-coat hypertension. Because of this, blood pressure readings may be taken at a few different times before a diagnosis of high blood pressure is determined.

How is high blood pressure treated?

Primary (essential) high blood pressure is usually treated with lifestyle changes and/or medication. Whether you need medication depends on the severity of your hypertension and whether you have other health problems or conditions, such as heart failure or diabetes, or are pregnant. In some people, lifestyle changes alone may be enough to control hypertension.

Take care. Take charge. Take heart.

Heart disease is the #1 killer of women. It is a greater threat than all cancers combined. Since 1984, more women than men have died each year of heart disease.

Silver Cross Hospital's Women's HeartAdvantage™ Program is committed to helping women with heart disease. But while there is much a hospital, its physicians and nurses can do, we can make an even greater difference together with you. Take care of yourself. Know what your risk is. Know what your heart health indicators are. And then take charge. Choose to quit smoking, to eat better, to exercise more, and to improve your health. Because women of America, this is your life. We hope you'll put your heart into it.

For more information on Silver Cross Hospital's Women's HeartAdvantage™ Program or a referral to a Women's HeartAdvantage™ certified physician, call 1-888-660-HEAL (4325) or visit www.silvercross.org.

Free Blood Pressure Check

Mondays, 9-11 a.m.

Brown Cardiovascular Institute

1300 Copperfield Ave., Joliet

Call 1-888-660-HEAL for more information.



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