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High Blood Pressure

What your numbers mean, why a condition you can't feel does so much damage, and how to bring it down.

Nearly half
of all U.S. adults have high blood pressure

2×
risk of dying of stroke or heart disease per 20-point rise in the top number

5–10 lb
of weight loss can lower your readings

READING YOUR NUMBERS

What the top and bottom numbers mean

<120/80
Normal
Healthy habits help keep your pressure here.

120–129 / <80
Elevated
Lifestyle changes started now can keep it from becoming hypertension.

130/80+
Hypertension
Medicine starts right away at 140/90 or higher, or at 130/80 or higher with heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease or a higher 10-year risk. Otherwise lifestyle comes first.

The top number, or systolic pressure, is the force in your arteries when your heart beats. The bottom number, or diastolic pressure, is the pressure while your heart rests between beats. Both are measured in millimeters of mercury (mmHg). Pressure varies through the day, so your doctor takes several readings on different occasions before making the diagnosis.

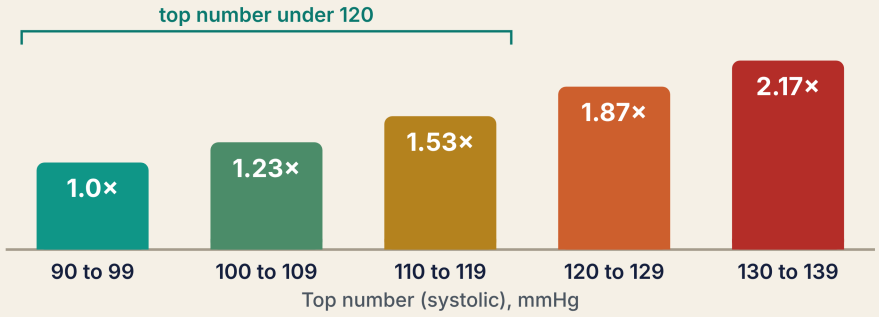
WHY LOWER IS BETTER

Risk climbs step by step, starting below 120

Risk of heart and blood vessel events, by top number

Compared with a top number of 90 to 99 in large studies.

Risk more than doubles by 130 to 139.



Each 10-point rise in the top number above 115 raises the risk of heart and blood vessel disease about 15 to 25%, more in women than in men. Each 20-point rise doubles the risk of dying of a stroke, heart disease or other blood vessel disease, at every age.

Get it checked

Most people feel nothing until the pressure is dangerously high, which is why it's called the silent killer. Get checked every year from age 40, or sooner if it runs high or you have other risks. At 18 to 39 with average risk and a normal reading, every 3 to 5 years.

PROTECTING YOUR HEART, BRAIN AND KIDNEYS

What high pressure damages, and what helps

WHAT IT DAMAGES

over years, often without symptoms

Heart	Narrowed heart arteries that cause chest pain or a heart attack, heart failure as the muscle wears down from years of extra work, and irregular rhythms.
Brain	Stroke, when a blood vessel in the brain bursts or a clot blocks it.
Kidneys	Harm to the tiny vessels that filter blood, leading to fluid buildup and higher pressure.
Eyes and sexual function	Damaged vessels in the retina can change vision or cause blindness. Reduced blood flow can affect sexual function in men and women.

WHAT HELPS

lifestyle for everyone, medicine as needed

Weight	Losing 5 to 10 pounds can lower your readings.
The DASH diet	Fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean protein, with less salt, saturated fat and added sugar. Processed foods, restaurant meals and packaged snacks carry a lot of salt.
Exercise	Brisk walking, swimming, cycling or dancing, at least 150 minutes a week at a moderate pace.
Alcohol and tobacco	Pressure rises with alcohol starting at about one drink a day. Not drinking is the best goal, and if you drink, keep to 1 a day for women and 2 for men. Nicotine raises pressure by tightening blood vessels, and even secondhand smoke raises risk.
Stress	Deep breathing, meditation, yoga and regular relaxation help some people.
Medication	Starts right away at 140/90 or higher, or at 130/80 or higher with heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease or a 10-year risk of 7.5% or more. Otherwise it follows 3 to 6 months of lifestyle changes. The goal is under 130/80, and under 120 on top is encouraged at higher risk. You may need blood tests of your kidneys and electrolytes when starting a new one.

GETTING THE DIAGNOSIS RIGHT

Home monitoring	Catches white coat hypertension (high only at the doctor's office) and masked hypertension (normal in the office, high at home). Keep a log and bring it to visits.
24-hour monitor	Tracks your pressure through the day and night for the most complete picture.
Other causes	About 90% of cases have no identifiable cause and build slowly over years. The rest come from conditions such as kidney disease, sleep apnea or thyroid problems, or from certain medications, and often appear suddenly with higher readings.

A READING ABOVE 180/120

With symptoms, call 911	Chest pain, shortness of breath, weakness or numbness, vision changes, confusion or a severe headache.
No symptoms	Sit quietly for 5 minutes and check again, then call the office the same day.

RISKS YOU CAN'T CHANGE

Men face higher risk before 64 and women after 65. High blood pressure in a parent or sibling raises your chances. African Americans develop it more often and at younger ages, and have more severe complications. If any of these apply, get checked every year, even before 40.

READ THE FULL ARTICLE

damianrasch.com/
hypertension-guide

For education only, and not a substitute for advice from your own physician. Sources include the 2025 AHA/ACC high blood pressure guideline and large cohort studies and meta-analyses of blood pressure and cardiovascular risk.

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