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Wolters Kluwer

Patient education: High blood pressure in adults (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is high blood pressure? — High blood pressure is a condition that puts you at risk for heart attack, stroke, and kidney disease. It does not usually cause symptoms. But it can be serious.

When your doctor or nurse tells you your blood pressure, he or she will say 2 numbers. For instance, your doctor or nurse might say that your blood pressure is "140 over 90." The top number is the pressure inside your arteries when your heart is contracting. The bottom number is the pressure inside your arteries when your heart is relaxed.

The table shows how doctors and nurses define high and normal blood pressure ([table 1](#)). "Prehypertension" is a term doctors or nurses use as a warning. People with prehypertension do not yet have high blood pressure. But their blood pressure is not as low as it should be for good health.

How can I lower my blood pressure? — If your doctor or nurse has prescribed blood pressure medicine, the most important thing you can do is to take it. If it causes side effects, do not just stop taking it. Instead, talk to your doctor or nurse about the problems it causes. He or she might be able to lower your dose or switch you to another medicine. If cost is a problem, mention that too. He or she might be able to put you on a less expensive medicine. Taking your blood pressure medicine can keep you from having a heart attack or stroke, and it can save your life!

Can I do anything on my own? — You have a lot of control over your blood pressure. To lower it:

- Lose weight (if you are overweight)
- Choose a diet low in fat and rich in fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products
- Reduce the amount of salt you eat
- Do something active for at least 30 minutes a day on most days of the week
- Cut down on alcohol (if you drink more than 2 alcoholic drinks per day)

It's also a good idea to get a home blood pressure meter. People who check their own blood pressure at home do better at keeping it low and can sometimes even reduce the amount of medicine they take.

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GRAPHICS

Definition of normal and high blood pressure

Level	Top number	Bottom number
High	140 or above	90 or above
Prehypertension	120 to 139	80 to 89
Normal	119 or below	79 or below

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