



CIS Houma
(985) 876-0300

CIS Thibodaux
(985) 446-2021

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What is hypertension & why is it dangerous?

A blood pressure reading between 120/80 and 139/89 indicates pre-hypertension, a condition that sometimes precedes hypertension. A higher reading indicates hypertension, a condition that causes damage to arterial walls and increases the chance for formation of blood clots. It is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, as well as cerebrovascular disease (diseases that effect the blood flow to the brain) and atherosclerosis (clogged arteries).

How is hypertension diagnosed?

Hypertension often has no symptoms. However, you may experience mild headaches, nosebleeds, dizziness or spots before your eyes. Since hypertension can be a silent killer, it is important to have regular medical checkups.

A standard blood pressure check can alert your doctor to the possible presence of hypertension. A health care professional will record two numbers when checking your blood pressure. The first number recorded is your highest pressure (systolic). This is the pressure of the blood pushing against the wall of the blood vessel when the heart is beating. The second number recorded is the lowest pressure (diastolic). This is the pressure of the blood pushing against the wall of the blood vessel when the heart is at rest between beats.

Generally, several blood pressure readings above 140/90 are required to determine a diagnosis of hypertension.

What causes hypertension?

Some people are at a higher risk for hypertension. Some of the factors that increase your risk are:

lifestyle

- smoking
- a diet high in salt and fat
- high alcohol consumption
- stress
- lack of exercise

background

- age 60 or older
- a family history of high blood pressure, heart disease, or stroke
- African American descent

medical history

- being overweight

- a cholesterol level of over 200
- a history of diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, or arterial disease of the legs
- a previous stroke
- longer than a year since your last blood pressure check

The more risk factors that apply to you, the greater your chances are of being diagnosed with hypertension.

How can you control hypertension?

If you are diagnosed with hypertension, your doctor may suggest a plan to help control it. This plan may include any or all of the following changes:

Diet

- Reduce your daily intake of salt and fat to two grams or less of each.
- Read food labels carefully and use them as a guide to healthy choices.
- In cooking, remember that the “three Bs” are best—bake, broil or boil.
- Eat sensible portion sizes.
- When eating out, choose from the “healthy heart” menu when available.

Activity

- Follow your doctor’s advice about adding exercise to your daily routine.

Weight

- Check with your doctor to determine your goal weight and make a decision to reach that goal.

Lifestyle

- Reduce stress whenever possible.
- Relax, exercise and have a positive attitude.

Habits

- Stop smoking.
- Limit alcohol consumption.

Medication & checkups

- Take any prescribed medication as directed by your physician.
- Visit your doctor regularly.

Always check with your doctor before changing diet and exercise habits.