Your blood pressure is a measure of the force of blood pushing against the walls of your arteries. It becomes higher with the more blood your heart pumps and when your arteries narrow. This raises your risk of serious problems like heart disease, stroke, eye problems and kidney disease. You might not know you have high blood pressure (also called hypertension) unless you get it checked.

What increases your risk?
Many factors can add to your risk of high blood pressure. These may include:

- **Obesity and being overweight**
- **Lack of exercise** – People who are inactive tend to have higher heart rates, which means your heart works harder, increasing the force on your arteries.
- **Race** – High blood pressure is more common among African Americans.
- **Age** – Risk increases with age.
- **Using tobacco** – Not only does it raise your blood pressure temporarily, the chemicals in tobacco can damage the lining of your artery walls, causing them to narrow.
- **Other conditions** – Including pregnancy, sleep apnea, kidney disease and diabetes.
- **Family history** – If a close relative has been diagnosed with high blood pressure, your risk is greater.
- **Diet high in sodium (salt).**
- **Diet low in potassium** – Not eating enough potassium-rich fruits and vegetables is a risk factor.
- **Drinking too much alcohol** – Over time, heavy drinking can damage your heart.
- **Stress** – High levels of stress can temporarily increase your blood pressure.

How blood pressure is measured.
Blood pressure is typically measured by a health care professional inflating a cuff around your arm and using a stethoscope to listen to the blood traveling through your arteries. There are also home monitoring devices that you can use yourself.

Two numbers are used to represent your blood pressure. The first number (systolic) measures the pressure in your blood vessels when your heart beats. The second number (diastolic) measures the pressure when your heart is at rest.

Symptoms to watch for.
High blood pressure does not usually cause symptoms until serious complications occur. Contact a health care provider immediately if you experience:

- Severe headache
- Fatigue or confusion
- Sudden changes in vision
- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Pounding in chest, neck or ears
- Irregular heartbeat
How high is too high?
Your health care provider may diagnose high blood pressure based on your blood pressure measurements over time. They will also monitor any unusually low pressure readings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORY</th>
<th>SYSTOLIC mm Hg (upper number)</th>
<th>DIASTOLIC mm Hg (lower number)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Less than 120 and</td>
<td>Less than 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevated</td>
<td>120 – 129</td>
<td>Less than 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High blood pressure (hypertension) Stage 1</td>
<td>130 – 139</td>
<td>or 80 – 89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High blood pressure (hypertension) Stage 2</td>
<td>140 or higher</td>
<td>or 90 or higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypertensive crisis.
If your blood pressure readings suddenly exceed 180/120 mm Hg, wait five minutes and then test your blood pressure again. If your readings are still unusually high, contact your doctor immediately.³

Choose a healthy eating plan.
The Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet encourages you to eat fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy, fish, poultry and whole grains – while limiting unhealthy fats.

Take action and take control of your health.
Healthy lifestyle choices can help improve your blood pressure and lower your risk of serious disease.

› Be active – Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic exercise per week. Include muscle-strengthening exercises at least two days a week.⁴
› Maintain a healthy weight – If you’re overweight or obese, losing weight can help you control your blood pressure.
› Eat well – Choose nutritious whole foods prepared at home instead of processed foods. Include fruits and vegetables rich in potassium.
› Use less salt – Check food labels for sodium content. Limit sodium to 1,500 mg or less per day.³
› Drink less alcohol – If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation: no more than one drink per day for healthy women and men over 65, and up to two drinks a day for men age 65 and younger.⁴
› Quit tobacco – Talk with your doctor if you need help.
› Manage stress – Take care of your health – body and mind.

If lifestyle changes aren’t enough, your doctor may prescribe medications to help control your blood pressure.