UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING HYPERTENSION

Did you know? In South Africa, more than 1 in 3 adults have high blood pressure, and it affects nearly 8 in 10 South Africans over the age of 55.

What is hypertension (high blood pressure)?

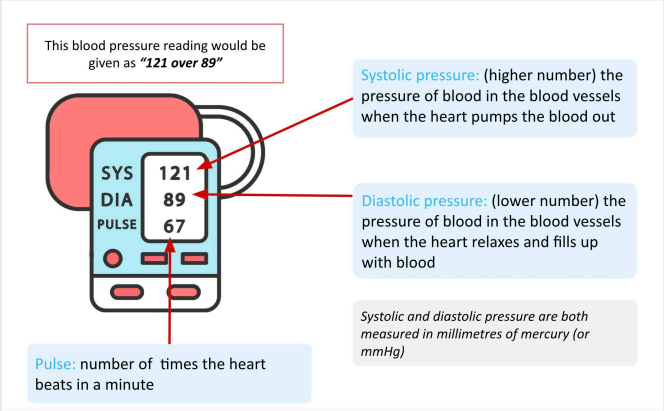
Hypertension, also known as high blood pressure, is a condition in which the blood flowing around your body pushes too hard against the walls of your blood vessels over a long period of time. You need some pressure to keep your blood moving around your body, but with hypertension there's too much pressure on the blood vessels. If left untreated, this can damage the blood vessels and the organs they are supplying, leading to health problems such as heart attacks, strokes, eye issues and kidney damage.

Hypertension can quietly damage your body for years before you notice that anything's wrong (which is why hypertension is sometimes called a silent disease), so it's important to have your blood pressure checked regularly. The good news is that the harmful effects of hypertension don't happen overnight – they usually take many years to develop.

How do I know if I have high blood pressure?

Because hypertension frequently has no symptoms, it's often diagnosed during a routine blood pressure check. Blood pressure is measured using a monitor attached to an inflatable cuff which is placed around your upper arm. It's expressed as 2 numbers, such as "121 over 89".

If your blood pressure is high, your healthcare provider will measure it on more than 1 occasion or ask you to monitor it at home. Only if it's high on at least 2 to 3 separate occasions, will you be diagnosed with hypertension.



Blood pressure ranges

BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORY	SYSTOLIC mmHg (upper number)	and/ or	DIASTOLIC mmHg (lower number)	RECOMMENDATION
Normal	Less than 120	and	Less than 80	Keep up healthy habits. Yearly checks recommended
Elevated	120 to 129	and	Less than 80	Make lifestyle changes to lower blood pressure. Reassess blood pressure every 3 to 6 months
High blood pressure (hypertension stage 1)	130 to 139	or	80 to 89	See a healthcare professional as soon as possible
High blood pressure (hypertension stage 2)	140 or higher	or	90 or higher	See a healthcare professional as soon as possible
Hypertensive crisis (consult your doctor immediately)	Higher than 180	and/ or	Higher than 120	Requires emergency medical attention, go to a hospital

What causes high blood pressure?

We don't always know what causes hypertension, but most people develop it because of their diet, their lifestyle or a medical condition. Some people have a family history of the condition, and it becomes more common with age.

How can I lower my blood pressure?

Fortunately, you may be able to lower your blood pressure and reduce your risk of developing the associated health problems.

Lifestyle changes to help lower blood pressure

- **Lose weight:** If you're overweight, try to lose weight. Even losing 2 to 5 kg can help reduce blood pressure.
- **Eat a healthy, balanced diet:** A specially designed diet known as the DASH (dietary approaches to stop hypertension) diet can reduce blood pressure. DASH emphasises fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, whole grains, poultry, fish and nuts; and limits sugary drinks, sweets and red meat. You may also be advised to eat a diet rich in potassium, or even be prescribed potassium supplements.
- **Cut down salt:** You should aim to eat less than 2 g of salt a day. Many foods already have a high salt content, so read the labels or look out for the Heart Mark on food packaging.
- **Get active:** Moderate to vigorous intensity activity regularly over several months can reduce blood pressure. Try to exercise for 30 minutes 3 to 5 times a week or more.
- **Limit alcohol:** Reducing alcohol intake can decrease blood pressure. Women shouldn't drink more than 1 alcoholic drink per day, and men not more than 2 alcoholic drinks per day.
- **Quit smoking:** Smoking increases your chance of further heart and blood pressure problems. Giving up smoking is important – ask your doctor for help to quit.
- **Limit stress**: Stress and anxiety can increase blood pressure and can also lead to unhealthy habits (such as eating unhealthy foods, smoking and drinking too much alcohol) which in turn raise your blood pressure.

Medication to treat high blood pressure

If your blood pressure is very high, your healthcare provider may prescribe medication to control it or to reduce your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. The main types of medication are:

- **ACE inhibitors:** help blood vessels to relax, reducing the pressure inside them.
- **Diuretics:** help if retaining water is part of the blood pressure problem.
- **Angiotensin II receptor blockers (ARBs):** help blood vessels to relax.
- **Calcium channel blockers:** lower blood pressure by preventing calcium from entering cells in the heart and arteries. This allows the blood vessels to relax and open more.
- **Beta-blockers:** help slow down a rapid heartbeat; fewer beats can mean less pressure in the blood vessels.
- **Vasodilators:** help prevent tightening or narrowing of the arteries.

As with any medication, you may experience side effects. You should discuss these with your healthcare provider.

Further reading

- Southern African Hypertension Society
- Heart and Stroke Foundation of South Africa
- Blood Pressure UK
- American Heart Association