



High blood pressure: Why you need to know your numbers

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is often to blame for heart attacks, strokes, kidney damage and several other health issues. Let World Hypertension Day on 17 May be your call to action. Know your numbers, take steps to control your blood pressure and live longer.

A blood pressure check takes a matter of seconds, but it could add years to your life. High blood pressure can be deadly, and frequently there are no signs until it's too late.

What is blood pressure?

It's the amount of force it takes for your heart to push oxygen-rich blood through your arteries to your organs and the rest of your body.

So, the harder your heart needs to work, the higher your blood pressure will be.



No warning signs



Known as the 'silent killer', many people have no idea they suffer from high blood pressure until they land up in hospital. There are no obvious symptoms, so the only way to know if your blood pressure is high or not is to get it measured.

What do the numbers mean?

A healthy blood pressure is **under 130/85**. The first number (systolic) refers to the amount of pressure in your arteries when your heart contracts, and the second (diastolic) is the measurement when your heart relaxes.

If your numbers are higher than this, it is a warning sign to take action. A reading of 140/90 means you should be off to see your doctor right away.

Fun fact: Your blood pressure is measured in millimetres of mercury (mmHg), which refers to how far up a tube of mercury in one of those old-fashioned manual blood pressure machines each reading is taken.



What can you do?



Don't think that hypertension won't affect you. Doctors say around half of South Africans have high blood pressure and, in most cases, it's not being adequately managed.

It may be necessary to take medication to control your blood pressure, but you can also work on keeping your blood pressure in check through some simple lifestyle changes.

Follow these heart-healthy tips:

Cut down on salt. While salt does add flavour to your life, a high salt diet can also contribute to hypertension. Limit how much you use to no more than one teaspoon a day, which includes those premixes like BBQ spice. Flavour your food with garlic, ginger, chilli, and fresh or dried herbs and spices instead. Many processed foods and takeaway meals contain a lot of salt, so go easy on those too.

Make healthy food choices: Fatty foods, sweets and sugary drinks are out, or should at least be limited to very special occasions. Fruit, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts and seeds, fish, poultry and low-fat or fat-free dairy should be the staples you eat daily.

Give up smoking. Did you know that after a cigarette your blood pressure increases for 30 minutes? What's more, smoking also increases the risk that plaque will build up inside your arteries, which narrows them and makes your heart work harder – a recipe for a heart attack.

Get moving. Just half an hour of being active a day can make a real difference. Experts found that moderate aerobic exercise – think brisk walking, swimming or cycling – can lower blood pressure by up to 10mmHg.

Ease up on alcohol. From age 35 especially, drinking regularly increases your risk for high blood pressure. Women should limit alcohol to one drink a day; men, no more than two a day.

Keep stress in check. Not only do stress and anxiety increase blood pressure, they also often cause us to make unhealthy choices, like living off takeaways, drinking too much and not exercising.

Reference

Heart and Stroke Foundation hypertension fact sheet

For more information or support, contact your organisation's employee wellness programme.

▶ Education department toll free:
0800 111 011

▶ Send a USSD to:
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