

Hypertension

Your heart pumping blood through your arteries puts pressure (tension) on the artery walls. **Hypertension** (high blood pressure) occurs when blood pressure stays elevated over time. The increased pressure of hypertension puts a strain on your circulatory system, which can ultimately lead to serious problems, such as stroke, heart disease, and kidney failure. About 50 million Americans have hypertension.

The February 27, 2002, issue of JAMA contains an article about the probability of developing hypertension.

DETECTING HYPERTENSION

Because hypertension usually does not cause symptoms until there is serious physical damage, it is often called the "silent killer." It is important to detect high blood pressure before it causes damage.

Blood pressure is measured by a quick and painless test using an inflatable cuff around the upper arm attached to a pressure gauge (**sphygmomanometer**). A **stethoscope** is used to listen to the sounds of blood pulsing through an artery. Blood pressure is recorded as two numbers measured in millimeters of mercury, for example; 120/80 mm Hg.

- The top number is **systolic pressure**, the maximum pressure in the artery as the heart contracts.
- The bottom number is **diastolic pressure**, the lowest pressure in the artery when the heart is between contractions.

Hypertension exists if the systolic pressure (top number) is 140 or higher or the diastolic pressure (bottom number) is 90 or higher. Optimal blood pressure is less than 120 systolic and less than 80 diastolic.

PREVENTING AND TREATING HYPERTENSION

See your doctor regularly and have your blood pressure checked. Hypertension cannot always be prevented, but following the steps below can help lower your blood pressure.

- Stop smoking and do not use illegal drugs.
- Lose excess body weight and follow a healthy, low-salt, low-fat diet.
- Stay physically active and develop an exercise program under your doctor's supervision.
- Limit alcohol intake to 1 drink per day for women and 2 drinks per day for men.
- Once hypertension develops, it usually requires treatment with medication that must be taken every day to prevent damage from high blood pressure. Your doctor can prescribe the right medication for you.

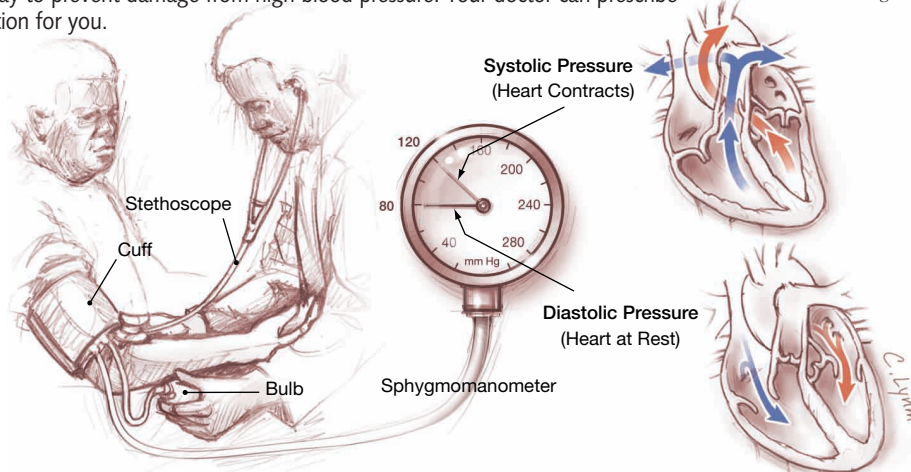
FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Heart Association
800/242-8721
www.americanheart.org
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
301/592-8573
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on JAMA's Web site at www.jama.com. A Patient Page on high blood pressure was published in the February 3, 1999, issue, on maintaining good health in the December 1, 1999, issue, on benefits of physical activity for the heart in the March 21, 2001, issue, and on heart failure in the February 6, 2002, issue.

Sources: American Academy of Family Physicians, American Medical Association Family Guide, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mayo Clinic, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, US Food and Drug Administration.



Lise M. Stevens, MA, Writer

Cassio Lynn, MA, Illustrator

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

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