

Know your numbers

One in three adults in the UK has high blood pressure – that's 16 million people. They also estimate that around a third of these people don't know that they have high blood pressure.

That's why high blood pressure, which is also called hypertension, is known as the 'silent killer', because it rarely has obvious symptoms – the only way to know whether you have it or not is to have your blood pressure checked.

Measuring your blood pressure

The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to have your blood pressure checked. This can be done by your GP or another healthcare professional, and you can also check it yourself with a home testing kit.

The British Heart Foundation recommends healthy adults aged over 40 should have their blood pressure checked at least once every five years. If you are at an increased risk of high blood pressure, you should have your blood pressure checked more often, ideally once a year.

Blood pressure is measured in millimeters of mercury (which is written as mmHg) and it is recorded as two figures:

1. systolic pressure: the pressure of the blood when your heart beats to pump blood out
2. diastolic pressure: the pressure of the blood when your heart rests in between beats

For example, if your GP says your blood pressure is '140 over 90', or 140/90mmHg, it means you have a systolic pressure of 140mmHg and a diastolic pressure of 90mmHg.

You are said to have high blood pressure if readings on separate occasions consistently show your blood pressure to be 140/90mmHg or higher.

A blood pressure reading below 130/80mmHg is considered to be normal.



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The dangers of high blood pressure

- High blood pressure is the biggest known cause of premature death and disability in the UK due to strokes, heart attacks and heart disease.
- It is also a risk factor for kidney disease and dementia.
- People with high blood pressure are 3 times more likely to develop heart disease and stroke and twice as likely to die from these diseases as people with normal blood pressure.
- Each year 125,000 adults in the UK have a heart attack or stroke in which high blood pressure is the key factor – that's one person every 4 minutes.
- High risk groups include over 55's, people of African Caribbean descent and people of South Asian origin who are more prone to other vascular conditions.

Are you at risk?

Your chances of having high blood pressure increase as you get older. There is often no clear cause of high blood pressure but you are at increased risk if you:

- are overweight
- have a relative with high blood pressure (that's a parent or brother or sister)
- are of African or Caribbean descent
- eat a lot of salt
- don't eat many fruit and vegetables
- don't do enough exercise
- drink a lot of coffee (or other caffeine-based drinks)
- drink a lot of alcohol
- are aged over 55

If you fall into any of the groups listed above, you should consider making changes to your lifestyle to lower your risk of high blood pressure. You should also consider having your blood pressure checked more often, ideally once a year.

What will happen if I'm found to have high blood pressure?

Generally speaking, if your doctor diagnoses you as having high blood pressure, he or she will first typically look at lifestyle changes you can make to lower your blood pressure naturally. Alternatively, they can prescribe medication to lower and control your blood pressure. These medications are very effective but in most cases once a person is put on drugs to control their blood pressure they will need to take them for the rest of their life.

You can take effective steps to reduce high blood pressure and importantly, to prevent high blood pressure in the first place, by:

- losing weight if you need to
- exercising regularly
- eating a healthy diet
- cutting back if you drink a lot of alcohol
- stopping smoking
- cutting down on salt and caffeine