

# Understanding High Blood Pressure

When you water your garden, you want a gentle low-pressure stream so you don't damage the plants. Just as extremely high water pressure can damage your garden or your plumbing, high pressure in your blood vessels can damage your body.

Unlike your water supply, your blood supply alternates between a higher pressure—during a heartbeat—and a lower pressure—between heartbeats. These are the high and low numbers in your blood pressure reading. A normal blood pressure reading is one that's not more than 120/80.

High blood pressure—or hypertension—can occur if the total volume of your circulating blood increases or if the size of your blood vessels gets smaller. Kidney disease, pregnancy and certain medications can cause high blood pressure, but more commonly, the cause is unknown. Heredity and lifestyle both play a role. Most high blood pressure has no symptoms until it's already done its damage. That's why it's called “the silent killer.”

## Effects of High Blood Pressure

- ✓ Blood vessels respond to increased pressure by getting thicker, narrower and less flexible, decreasing blood flow and raising blood pressure further. Excess fats circulating in the blood add to the problem by creating fatty deposits in your arteries. The kidneys respond to the decreased blood flow by producing hormones that raise your blood pressure still further.
- ✓ Your heart is affected by high blood pressure in two ways: Narrowed arteries result in the heart having to work harder to supply blood to your body. This may cause the heart to enlarge and become less flexible and less efficient. Your blood flow becomes poorer and poorer. Obstruction of the coronary arteries can also directly result in a heart attack.
- ✓ High blood pressure can damage the kidneys, causing toxic wastes to build up in your body.
- ✓ High blood pressure increases your risk of stroke.

## The Role of Salt

Too much salt in your diet results in your body—and your blood—retaining more water to try to dilute the salt. Excess salt may also contribute to a narrowing of the blood vessels. Although not everyone has increased blood pressure as a result of eating salt, those who do should restrict the amount of salt they eat.



## Are You at Risk?

Your chances of developing high blood pressure are greater if you:

- ✓ are overweight.
- ✓ are of African-American descent.
- ✓ have relatives with high blood pressure.
- ✓ drink excess alcohol.
- ✓ smoke.
- ✓ eat excess salt.
- ✓ use certain medications—including birth control pills, steroids, decongestants and anti-inflammatories.
- ✓ are inactive.

## What You Can Do

If you have a tendency for high blood pressure, six things can help you lower it:

- ✓ Reduce salt in your diet.
- ✓ Lose weight.
- ✓ Exercise regularly, after consulting your healthcare provider.
- ✓ Manage stress effectively.
- ✓ Eat a low-fat diet.
- ✓ Quit smoking.

