

# What is Blood Pressure



Blood pressure is the force (pressure) that the blood exerts inside the arteries (blood vessel walls). A certain amount of pressure is required to keep the blood flowing throughout the body. When you run or walk fast the heart will beat faster and the blood pressure will rise. This is normal and is good training for your heart. However if your blood pressure is always high, then the lining of the blood vessels can be damaged. If you smoke or have high cholesterol, the damage to blood vessels may be increased. When the blood pressure is high, the heart has to work much harder to pump the blood around the body.

## **What Causes High Blood Pressure?**

Usually there is no definite cause. However in a small percent of people, kidney disease or abnormal production of hormones from the adrenal glands above the kidney may cause high blood pressure. Occasionally some medicines used to treat ulcers, arthritis or depression may cause a rise in blood pressure. High blood pressure is more common as we get older and it tends to run in families. It is also common in people who are overweight, who drink too much alcohol and in people who take a lot of salt in their diet.

## **Do you have high blood pressure?**

High blood pressure is common. In Ireland about 1 in 7 adults have high blood pressure. Usually you don't know you have it. Sometimes high blood pressure causes a headache or a nosebleed. The only way to find out if you have high blood pressure is to have a check-up with your doctor. A few readings will be needed because it's normal for the blood pressure to vary from time to time throughout the day. Other factors such as exercise or emotion may also influence blood pressure levels.

## **A sample blood pressure measurement:**

**130 / 80**

**Systolic pressure (130)** is the pressure when the beat or contraction of the heart forces the blood around the body.

**Diastolic pressure (80)** is the lowest pressure, which occurs between the heartbeats when the heart is resting.

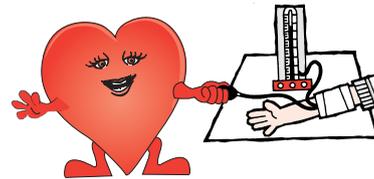
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## Why bother to treat it?

High blood pressure adds to the workload of the heart and can damage the lining of blood vessels. Then the blood supply to your heart, brain, kidneys, eyes etc. will be put at risk. The risk of heart attack, stroke, kidney disease and eye damage will be higher in somebody with high blood pressure compared to somebody with normal blood pressure.

## What should you do?

Fortunately high blood pressure can be treated by changes in lifestyle and medication. It is important to have your blood pressure measured regularly.



Lifestyle changes may be necessary. Ask yourself

- Do you take regular exercise? - Long-term physical activity can lower blood pressure and is also useful in controlling weight. Exercise also makes you feel "good"
- What about diet? Do you take salt? - Reduce your salt intake, avoid foods high in salt such as processed foods, crisps, peanuts and take-aways.
- Do you drink more than the recommended amount of alcohol? 2 units per day for women and 3 units per day for men
  - 1 unit = 1/2 pint beer
  - 1 unit = 1 small glass of wine
  - 1 1/2 unit = 1 measure of spirit.
- Do you smoke? You must stop if you can.
- Take time to relax - go for a walk or relax with a book or listen to music.

## Medication for high blood pressure

If your blood pressure is not kept under control by lifestyle changes alone, you may need to take tablets. Take your doctor's advice and take your tablets regularly according to prescription. Keep a good supply and don't let the tablets run out. Modern tablets have few side-effects but if you do have problems, tell your doctor and a different tablet can be tried. Don't stop taking them without telling your doctor.

**Usually the treatment is for life**  
**Remember by controlling high blood pressure**  
**the risk of heart disease and stroke is greatly reduced.**