

Why should you be concerned about high blood pressure?

Do you know what your blood pressure is? One in 4 Americans has high blood pressure (BP), but 1 in 3 people who have high BP don't realize it. Because a person with high blood pressure initially has no symptoms, many people don't know how serious it is. High blood pressure increases a person's risk for developing heart disease, stroke (the first and third leading causes of death, respectively), and kidney disease.

High blood pressure can be effectively controlled through diet, exercise, and medications, if necessary.

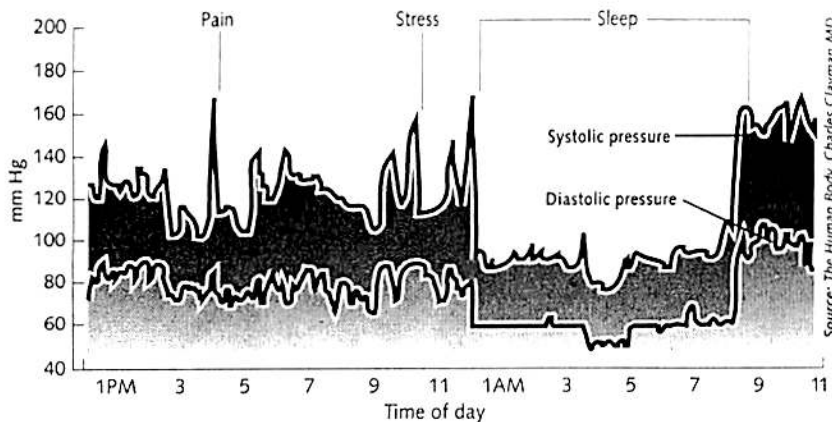
Many medications are available to treat the condition.

Researchers, such as those reporting in the February 3, 1999, issue of *JAMA*, continue to investigate whether having high blood pressure affects mental functioning in those older than 65 years. The researchers did not find a clear association, which contradicts earlier research. More studies are needed to study the many effects of high blood pressure.

You should discuss your blood pressure with your doctor.

WHAT IS HYPERTENSION?

Hypertension is the medical term for an abnormally high blood pressure (BP), which is the amount of force pushing against the walls of the arteries as blood flows through the body. Blood pressure is given as two numbers in measurements of millimeters (mm) of mercury (Hg), such as 140/90 mm Hg. The top number is called **systolic pressure** (the maximum pressure in the artery produced as the heart contracts) and the bottom number is the **diastolic pressure** (lowest pressure in the arteries when the heart is between contractions). A BP of 140/90 or higher is considered high blood pressure.



The chart above demonstrates how BP varies in response to various stimuli, such as pain or stress. Such variations are normal.

Additional Sources: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, American Heart Association, AMA's Web site (www.ama-assn.org/insight/spec_con/bp/bp.htm)

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WHAT CAUSES HIGH BP?

There is no single known cause of high BP. There is no complete cure for the common type of **primary or essential hypertension** but it can be controlled. People who have high blood pressure not controlled by diet and exercise need to take medication every day to control their blood pressure and prevent serious long-term complications. If you have high BP, discuss this with your doctor.

HOW TO PREVENT HIGH BP:

- Maintain a healthy weight (being overweight makes you 2 to 6 times more likely to develop high BP).
- Be more physically active (at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week).
- Eat foods low in salt and sodium (no more than 4 to 6 grams, or a total of 1 to 1.5 teaspoons of table salt per day), total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol. Eat foods high in potassium, calcium, and magnesium (fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, fish).
- If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation (no more than 1 to 2 drinks per day).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI Information Center) 301/251-1222 or www.nhlbi.nih.gov
- American Heart Association 800/AHA-USA1 or www.americanheart.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

