

How Low Should You Go?

You may be at risk for high blood pressure even if your numbers are within normal range.

a QualityHealth exclusive

Time for a blood-pressure check? It might be a good idea to pay closer attention to your reading. Traditional medical wisdom has viewed blood-pressure levels below 140 systolic and 90 diastolic (commonly read as 140/90 mm Hg) as acceptable. However, a new condition called prehypertension may be a cause for concern even if your blood pressure is below this cutoff point.



Coined last year by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI), prehypertension is defined as any blood pressure reading above the "healthy" 120/80 mm Hg, but below 140/90 mm Hg — the official threshold for hypertension. These high-normal blood pressure readings should be carefully scrutinized because they may be a precursor to full-blown hypertension, says Janet O'Mahony, M.D., an internist at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, Md., who specializes in the treatment of hypertension and diabetes.

"If you already have a number in the high-normal range, you're probably in the higher-risk category," O'Mahony says.

Even adults who have healthy readings at age 55 have a 90% risk of developing high blood pressure at some point in their lives, according to statistics from the NHLBI. The risk is even greater for people with prehypertensive blood pressures, says O'Mahony.

Daniel Norberg, M.D. a cardiologist at Memorial Heart and Vascular Institute in Hollywood, Fla., says prehypertension is a "screening number" and not a formal disease category, but it should be taken seriously nonetheless. "It's really to raise awareness and to make the medical community more aware of it, too," Norberg says. "More attention needs to be called to it. Down the road, it really does cause problems."

Prehypertension has no outward physical symptoms, so it can't be detected without a blood pressure screening. If left untreated, it can increase your risk of many other physical problems, including strokes, heart attacks and kidney dysfunction. But fortunately, simple lifestyle changes can be effective in eliminating prehypertension.

According to Norberg, exercise, weight loss and quitting smoking can often lower prehypertensive blood pressure levels. Drugs are generally not recommended. "The idea is not to start the patient out on medication," he says.

Follow the DASH Diet to Lower Your Blood Pressure

Diet can also be an important factor in eliminating prehypertension. One eating plan that has been shown to lower blood pressure is the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) Diet. The diet emphasizes fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy foods while reducing red meats and saturated fats. Reduced salt intake is also key to the diet's success; clinical studies have indicated that patients on the lowest-sodium version of the

plan saw the greatest improvement in their blood-pressure levels, says O'Mahony.

"If you just lower your salt to a modest level, it does improve things," O'Mahony says. "But the lower the better."

The biggest drawback of the diet, says O'Mahony, is the amount of time it takes to prepare meals. Most frozen and boxed foods are full of salt, and it can be time-consuming to cook fresh meats and chop up vegetables. But the benefits are plentiful. NHLBI trials of the diet found that the plan lowered blood pressure in all participants, even those in the highest-sodium group.

You can download the DASH Diet, which features sample menus and recipes, or order a copy online at <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/dash/>. Or you can call the NHLBI Health Information Center at 301.592.8573; fax your order to 240.629.3246 (order forms are available online); or send your order form to NHLBI Information Center, P.O. Box 30105, Bethesda, M.D. 20824-0105. Single copies are free, but there is a charge for additional copies.

Check Your Pressure Where You Shop

Norberg says regular blood-pressure checks are also important in detecting prehypertension before it progresses to high blood pressure. Even if you feel perfectly healthy, you can benefit from an occasional visit to the do-it-yourself blood pressure monitors located in many drugstores and supermarkets. Most machines are automatic and require no expertise to operate. "If [you're] pushing the cart through [the aisle], that's a good time to check it and see," Norberg advises.

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