



**Irish Heart  
Foundation**

The National Stroke & Heart Charity



# **MANAGE YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE**

and reduce your risk  
of heart disease  
and stroke

**[irishheart.ie](http://irishheart.ie)**



## About this booklet

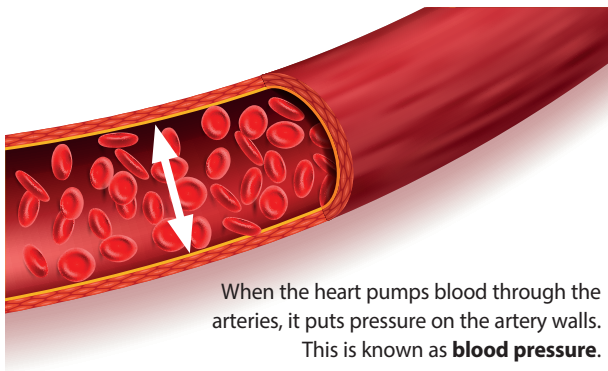
High blood pressure increases your risk for heart disease, stroke and other serious conditions. It does not have obvious symptoms, so it can be easy to ignore. Indeed, two in three Irish adults over age 50 have high blood pressure and half do not know it.

This booklet is for people diagnosed with high blood pressure and those who want to keep their blood pressure within a normal range. It outlines why high blood pressure matters and explains the different ways to manage your blood pressure.

Although untreated high blood pressure can have a severe impact on a person's health, there are many everyday things you can do to keep it under control. Steps like getting your blood pressure checked, not smoking, eating a balanced diet, being active and taking medications if you need them will all help you reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke.

## What is blood pressure?

Blood travels from the heart through the body in tubes called arteries. As the heart pumps blood through the arteries it puts pressure on the artery walls. This is what we know as blood pressure. Your blood pressure will change throughout the day depending on what you are doing.



When the heart pumps blood through the arteries, it puts pressure on the artery walls. This is known as **blood pressure**.

Blood pressure is measured in millimetres of mercury (mmHg) and shown as two numbers – one over the other.

- The top number shows the systolic blood pressure – the pressure as your heart beats and pumps blood around the body.
- The bottom number shows the diastolic blood pressure – the pressure when your heart relaxes between beats.

Your systolic blood pressure is always the higher number of the two.

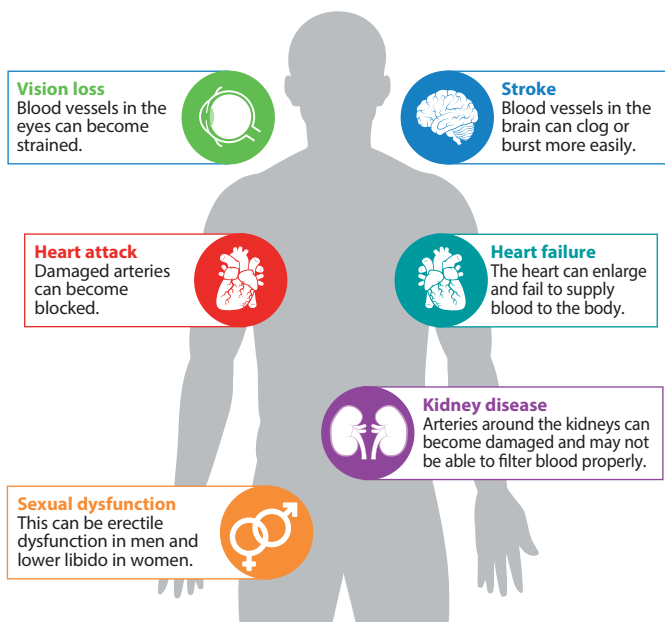
If you are told that your blood pressure is 120 over 70 (written as 120/70 mmHg), your systolic blood pressure is 120 mmHg and your diastolic blood pressure is 70 mmHg.

## Why is blood pressure important?

Everybody has a blood pressure. Without it, the heart cannot pump blood around the body. However, health problems can occur if blood pressure is high or low.

- If your blood pressure is high, you are at greater risk for a range of conditions such as heart attack or stroke, heart failure, dementia, kidney failure, eye damage, erectile dysfunction and poor circulation in your legs.
- If your blood pressure is low, you may experience dizziness or fainting.

## Risks of high blood pressure



## How is blood pressure checked?

Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist can check your blood pressure with a blood pressure monitor. Modern blood pressure monitors give a digital reading.





The blood pressure monitor is attached to a cuff wrapped around your upper arm. As your blood pressure is being checked, the cuff will inflate and then deflate. As the cuff inflates you will feel it tightening around your arm. This may feel a little strange or uncomfortable but only lasts a few seconds.

Your blood pressure should ideally be taken after sitting down and resting for at least 5 minutes and after you empty your bladder. The doctor, nurse or pharmacist won't talk to you as they check your blood pressure, as this can affect your reading.

Once your blood pressure reading is confirmed, ask for the numbers and what they mean. Keep a note for your records.

### **How often should I have my blood pressure checked?**

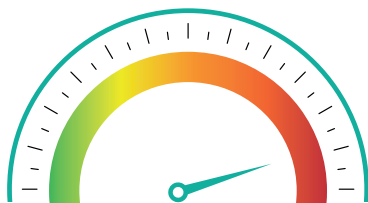
If you are under 40, have your blood pressure checked once every 3 years at your GP or local pharmacy. If you are over 40, have your blood pressure checked once a year. Your GP will assess your overall risk of heart disease and stroke and may advise more frequent blood pressure checks if needed. If your blood pressure is high, it will be checked regularly.

### **What is high blood pressure?**

High blood pressure is blood pressure that is consistently higher than normal. The medical term for high blood pressure is hypertension.

The ideal blood pressure is less than 120/70. For most people, high blood pressure is 140/90 or more. This will be lower if you have other conditions like diabetes or kidney disease or if you've had a stroke or already have heart disease.

## Three main blood pressure ranges



**Normal blood pressure**

**Less than 120/70**

**Raised blood pressure**

**130/80**

**High blood pressure**

**Over 140/90**

### How will I know if I have high blood pressure?

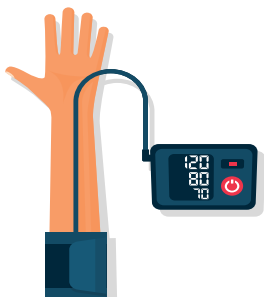
High blood pressure does not usually have any symptoms. You may be living with high blood pressure and its health risks but still look and feel well.

The only way to know your blood pressure level is to have it checked. Sadly, some people only learn they have high blood pressure when they are admitted to hospital because of a heart attack or stroke.

All adults over the age of 40 should have their blood pressure checked once every year.

### How does high blood pressure lead to a heart attack or stroke?

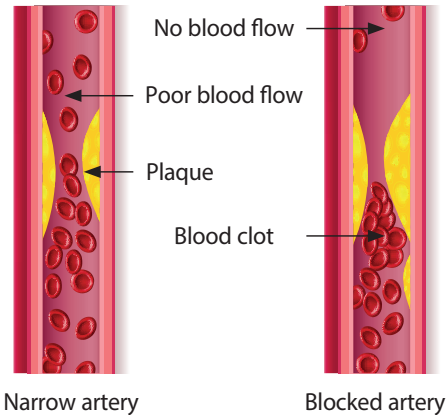
When blood pressure is consistently higher than normal, the heart uses more force to push blood against the artery walls. Over time, this pressure can damage the walls of the artery, allowing fatty material to build up and harden into plaque. This build-up narrows the artery and limits blood flow to your organs. If the plaque breaks off it can cause a clot that blocks the artery.



High blood pressure can lead to:

- a heart attack if there is a blockage in an artery that supplies blood to the heart muscle
- a stroke if an artery supplying the brain becomes blocked or a blood vessel in the brain bursts and bleeds.

### Impact of plaque build-up on blood flow



### What causes high blood pressure?

Often there is no single cause of high blood pressure.

This type of blood pressure is called primary hypertension. However, a number of factors can make high blood pressure more likely. These include:

- smoking
- lack of physical activity
- drinking too much alcohol
- eating too many foods high in salt
- living with overweight or obesity
- age – blood pressure increases as we grow older
- family history – high blood pressure can run in families
- ethnicity – high blood pressure is more common in people from an African, Caribbean or South Asian background.

High blood pressure that has a known cause is called secondary hypertension. Causes of secondary hypertension can include:

- kidney problems
- abnormal levels of hormones
- thyroid problems
- diabetes
- obstructive sleep apnoea
- oral contraceptive pill
- some over-the-counter medications and herbal products.

With secondary hypertension, blood pressure may return to normal by identifying and successfully treating the underlying cause.



### **How can I reduce high blood pressure?**

Once detected, high blood pressure is easily treated. There are several things you can do to keep your blood pressure under control.

**Know your numbers.** Ask your healthcare professional for your blood pressure reading and what it means any time you have it checked. Keep a record if you measure it yourself. This will give you a good overall picture of what is normal for you.

### **Aim for a healthy weight and waist measurement.**

If you are living with overweight or obesity, even small changes to your lifestyle can help to prevent or reduce weight gain and reduce your risk of high blood pressure.



**Try to eat a healthy balanced diet.** A diet that is high in fruit, vegetables and wholegrains, low in salt and moderate in meat, fish, eggs, poultry and low-fat dairy can be very helpful in controlling your blood pressure.

**Reduce the amount of salt in your diet.** Eating too much salt causes the body to retain fluid and increases the volume of blood being pumped around the body, adding to pressure on the artery walls.

Cut down on high-salt processed foods like burgers, pizza, pot noodles, salted snacks and ready-made soups or sauces. If preparing food at home, consider swapping salt for seasonings like black pepper, spices or lemon juice.

**Be more physically active.** Aim to do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity a week. Moderate intensity activity raises your heart rate and makes you breathe faster.

You can break up the 150 minutes however you like, but try to be active for at least 10 minutes at a time. Find something you enjoy. Going for a brisk walk, a cycle or a swim is ideal.

Discuss any new activity with your doctor if you have high blood pressure or another medical condition, or if it has been a while since you last exercised. And take your time building up the intensity and length of activity.

**Stop smoking.** Smoking causes plaque to build up in the arteries, limiting blood flow. When you quit smoking, the benefits start in as little as 20 minutes. For help to quit smoking, Freetext QUIT to 50100 or Freephone 1800 201 203.

**Reduce your alcohol.** Stay within the recommended weekly limits to manage your blood pressure.

The recommended low-risk alcohol guidelines are:

- **less than 17 standard drinks over 7 days for men**
- **less than 11 standard drinks over 7 days for women.**

### Standard drinks



**½ pint = 1 standard drink**



**1 spirit - pub single measure = 1 standard drink**



**1 small glass of wine (100ml) = 1 standard drink**



**1 pint = 2 standard drinks**



**Bottle of wine (750ml) = 7 standard drinks**

Remember, these are limits not targets.

## How to stay within safe alcohol limits

- Choose lower-strength alcoholic drinks.
- Alternate alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. For instance, every second drink might be water, non-alcoholic beer or a soft drink.
- Try not to get into rounds. If it is your round, choose a non-alcoholic drink.
- Switch to smaller amounts. For instance, swap a pint for a bottle or a ½ pint glass.
- Do not drink more than 6 standard drinks on any one occasion.
- Spread drinks over the week. Have 2-3 alcohol free days.

## If my blood pressure is high, will I need to take medication?

Yes, your doctor may advise you to go on medication to help reduce your blood pressure. Many types of medication are available, and your doctor might prescribe more than one medication at a time.

Blood pressure medications work in different ways. They can relax your blood vessels, widen blood vessels, make the heart beat more slowly and with less force or help you flush excess water and salt from the body.

It can take time for you and your doctor to find the right type of medication for you. Some medications start working very quickly and others can take a few weeks.

Once you start medications, you will usually need to take them for the rest of your life to keep your blood pressure within normal limits. High blood pressure medications only work for as long as you take them as instructed.

## **Tips for taking blood pressure medications safely**

- Get familiar with the name of your medication(s) and the dose.
- Ask your doctor when and how best to take your medication, for example in the morning with food or later in the day.
- Take your medication at the same time each day. Set up a reminder or separate your tablets in a pill box.
- If you miss a dose, take your normal dose next time.
- Before starting any other medication or supplement, ask your pharmacist if they are safe to take with your blood pressure medication.
- Your doctor will outline any medication side effects. Tell them if you have any concerns after you start the medication so they can find another medication or a dose that suits you better.
- Renew your prescription in time so you always have a supply of tablets.

**Never stop or change the dose of your blood pressure medication without talking with your doctor first.**





## **Can I check my own blood pressure?**

Yes, you can buy a blood pressure monitor to use at home. Home monitoring can help you take control of your blood pressure and play an active role in managing your health.

With so many monitors available it can be hard to know the best one for you. It is very important that you choose a reliable device that can give you accurate readings. Check out the STRIDE BP website ([stridebp.org](http://stridebp.org)) for a list of independently tested devices that are approved for home use.

Whichever blood pressure monitor you choose, make sure the cuff is the right size for your arm. Using a cuff that is too large or too small can give you an inaccurate blood pressure reading.

If you check your blood pressure at home, keep a record of your readings and bring them to your next doctor's visit.

## **What happens if my blood pressure is different every time it is checked?**

Your blood pressure changes depending on the time of day. It is naturally higher during the day and lower at night.

Some people find that their blood pressure may be normal at home but high when they go to their doctor or pharmacist. This is sometimes called 'white coat syndrome', where a person might feel anxious when visiting a healthcare professional.

Your doctor will only diagnose high blood pressure if your blood pressure is above normal levels after a couple of separate readings.

Sometimes your doctor or nurse may recommend monitoring your blood pressure over 24 hours so they can get an average reading.

## How do I talk to my doctor about high blood pressure?

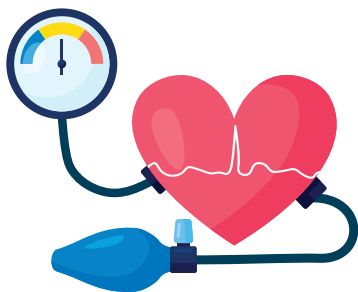
It is important to try and make the most of every appointment with your doctor. Before you see your doctor, think about the following:

- Do you check your blood pressure at home? If so, how often do you check it?
- Do you keep a record of your blood pressure? Bring your readings with you if you do.
- Are you taking any vitamins, other supplements or other medications? If you do, bring a list with you.
- How often do you miss a dose of your medications?
- Do you have any side effects from your medications?



## Questions to ask

1. What is my blood pressure reading today?
2. Is this the same/better/worse than at my last appointment?
3. What should my blood pressure be?
4. Do you think my medications are working?
5. (If not on medications) Do you think I will need to go on medications?
6. Do I need to use a 24-hour blood pressure monitor?
7. What is my cholesterol?
8. What is a healthy weight for me?
9. What lifestyle changes could I be making?
10. (If you have discussed lifestyle changes at a previous appointment) How can I get help to stop smoking/be more active/improve my diet?



**Remember, small changes can make a big difference to your blood pressure. Work with your doctor to know your numbers and find the right treatment for you.**



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The Irish Heart Foundation is a community of people who fight to protect the cardiovascular health of everyone in Ireland. We rely on charitable donations for over 90% of our funding. We support, educate and train people to save and transform lives, campaign for patients, promote positive health strategies, support research and provide vital public information. We need your support – through donations, as a volunteer or on our training courses.

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