

NUMBERS TO KNOW: your blood pressure

High blood pressure is a common problem. About half of American adults have it. In fact, many people have dangerously high blood pressure and don't even know it. This is because high blood pressure often has no symptoms and puts you at risk of having a heart attack, stroke or kidney failure.

What is high blood pressure?

When your heart beats, it pumps blood through the blood vessels. High blood pressure means the force of your blood against the blood vessels is too high. Over time, this strains the heart and damages blood vessels.

What the numbers mean

Blood pressure is measured in two numbers:

- Systolic blood pressure is the upper number. This measures how much pressure the blood is putting against blood vessels when the heart beats.
- Diastolic blood pressure is the lower number. This is how much pressure the blood is putting against blood vessels between heartbeats.

Both numbers are important signs of heart health. Normal blood pressure is less than 120 (upper number) and less than 80 (lower number). If either one is higher, you may be diagnosed with high blood pressure.

Can high blood pressure be avoided?

In many cases, a healthy lifestyle and medical care can control or prevent high blood pressure. This can lower the risk of a heart attack, stroke or other problems.

To keep blood pressure in check, follow these guidelines:



Lose excess weight if needed.



Don't smoke.



Eat a healthy diet with vegetables, fruits, whole grains and lean protein.



Get exercise regularly. A minimum of 30 minutes, 5 days a week is best.



Avoid too much salt in your diet.



Avoid or limit alcohol.



Manage stress and use relaxation methods if needed.



Manage other health conditions like diabetes.

You don't have to do this alone. Your doctor can help you with a plan to lower blood pressure. He or she may help you find ways to lose weight, and may give you diet and exercise guidelines to follow.

Sources: American Heart Association, American Academy of Family Physicians