

# High Blood Pressure and Women



High blood pressure—also known as hypertension—develops when blood flows through your arteries at higher-than-normal pressures. It affects men and women of all ages and can cause serious health problems. Everyone should work to keep their blood pressure under control. But women should be especially mindful of their numbers.

## Fast Facts

**You're not too young to think about it.** Though the risk is higher as you get older, women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s can have high blood pressure.

**If you're pregnant or plan to be, take extra care.** Some women who have a healthy blood pressure develop high blood pressure during or after pregnancy.

**Controlling your blood pressure helps your whole body.** It helps protect against damage to your heart, blood vessels, kidneys, eyes, and brain.

## Pay Attention to You

Although you generally can't feel high blood pressure, you *may* have warning signs that you write off as just stress or hormone-related. These include tiredness, low energy, sleeping problems, hot flashes, fluid retention, headaches, blurred vision, or chest pain, which some women report as their bra feeling "too tight." If something doesn't feel right, *don't tough it out—check it out.* Have your blood pressure checked and ask your healthcare provider what to do if it's high.



## Know (All) Your Risks

Unhealthy lifestyle habits can cause anyone to develop high blood pressure, but some things increase a woman's risk. These include problems during pregnancy, taking certain birth control medications, and having premenstrual migraines. Other factors you can't change include your genes, as high blood pressure runs in families; certain health problems; and, importantly, your race.

**Discrimination is a source of chronic stress that may increase the risk of developing high blood pressure.**

**African Americans** tend to have higher average blood pressure numbers and they develop high blood pressure earlier in life. Two-thirds of African American women in their 40s have high blood pressure.

**Asian Americans** are the least likely to have their high blood pressure under control, in part because healthcare providers may overlook their risks. Only about 14 percent of Asian American women age 20 and older have their high blood pressure under control. Starting a conversation with a healthcare provider can help change that.

# High Blood Pressure and Women

## Commit to a Healthy Blood Pressure

Many self-care activities, such as de-stressing, exercising, and eating healthy can help control blood pressure. Follow these tips:



**Move More:** Aim for 150 minutes (2½ hours) a week of physical activity. Try 30 minutes of activity five days a week. Keep moving during pregnancy—aim for 30 to 60 minutes 2 to 7 times a week to keep your blood pressure healthy.



**Eat a Heart-Healthy Diet:** Consider following the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan. Use herbs for flavor instead of salt and add one fruit or vegetable to every meal. Having too much salt (sodium), too little potassium, or too much alcohol is bad for your blood pressure.



**Aim for a Healthy Weight:** Losing just 3 to 5 percent of your weight can improve blood pressure if you're overweight. Ask a friend or family member for help or encourage them to join a weight loss program with you. Social support can help keep you motivated.



**Manage Stress:** Stress can increase your blood pressure and make your body store more fat. Reduce stress with meditation, relaxing activities, or support from a counselor or online group.



**Quit Smoking:** Smoking damages your heart and blood vessels. Call 1-800-QUIT-NOW or visit [smokefree.gov](http://smokefree.gov) to get additional support.

Learn more about high blood pressure, find resources to track your numbers, and learn how to keep it under control at [nhlbi.nih.gov/hypertension](http://nhlbi.nih.gov/hypertension).

## Check Your Blood Pressure

Have your blood pressure checked at least once a year. Your healthcare provider may suggest that you check it yourself, too. Here's how to do it the correct way:

- **30 minutes before your test, don't exercise, drink caffeine, or smoke.**
- **Right before your test, go to the bathroom.**
- **During the test, rest your arm on a table at the level of your heart and put your feet flat on the floor. Relax and don't talk.**

## Plan for a Healthy Pregnancy

It's important to keep your blood pressure under control before, during, and after pregnancy. In the United States, high blood pressure happens in 1 in every 12 to 17 pregnancies. High blood pressure during pregnancy can harm the mother's kidneys and other organs and can cause the baby to be born too early or underweight. High blood pressure that develops during pregnancy and causes damage to other organs is called preeclampsia.

If you're thinking about having a baby, talk with your doctors about how to lower or control your high blood pressure before and during pregnancy.

- **As part of your regular prenatal care, your provider will check your blood pressure. You may also need to check it at home to monitor your numbers.**
- **If you take blood pressure medicine, make sure it's safe to take when pregnant.**

