

Blood pressure and Knowing Your Numbers



Understanding high blood pressure, its risks, and ways to reduce it

Do you know your numbers? Don't worry, we're not back at school and no one is expecting you to memorise and repeat times tables. The phrase "know your numbers" relates to knowing and understanding your blood pressure level and, from there, what constitutes overly high or low blood pressure, the health risks these pose, and what you can do about it.

The reason "Know your numbers" is important – and in fact was at the heart of the charity Blood Pressure UK's recent [Know your Numbers! Week](#) – is because high blood pressure, in particular, is potentially a killer, of people of all ages. So, here's what you need to know.

'Silent killer'

High blood pressure (or hypertension) is often asymptomatic, and so you can have no idea you have it. It is therefore often called 'the silent killer'. Blood Pressure UK calculates as many as one in three UK adults has high blood pressure, yet half have no idea.

High blood pressure is responsible for more than half of all strokes and heart attacks, is a risk factor for heart and kidney disease and vascular dementia, and is the third biggest risk factor for all diseases after smoking and poor diet. While our understanding of Covid-19 is still evolving, it is recognised that high blood pressure and obesity may play a part in poorer outcomes and recovery rates, plus the virus itself often appears to affect the blood and heart.

Given that high blood pressure is normally asymptomatic what, then, can you do about it?

The first thing is to recognise [what high blood pressure looks like](#). And this is where all those numbers at the beginning come into play. As this handy [NHS explainer outlines](#), most healthy adults will have a blood pressure reading of between 90/60mmHg and 120/80mmHg.

While it is not vital to know what mmHg stands for, it is 'millimetres of mercury'. Those who are older may remember having your blood pressure taken with a machine where you could see the finger of mercury going up and down as the cuff was tightened or loosened.

Low blood pressure (or hypotension) is below 90/60mmHg. It is generally considered less of an issue than high blood pressure but can still cause symptoms such as light-headedness or dizziness, feeling sick, blurred vision, generally feeling weak, confusion, or fainting. Consistently low readings are very definitely still something to go and see your GP about.

High blood pressure, on the other hand, tends to be anything above 140/90mmHg. The two numbers in any reading relate to "systolic" pressure, or the pressure when your heart pushes blood out, and "diastolic" pressure, or the pressure when your heart rests between beats. So 140/90, for example, will be a systolic pressure of 140mmHg and a diastolic of 90mmHg.

While it is only a GP, nurse or cardiologist who really needs to understand the science behind all this, the point is that, by getting familiar with the idea of getting your blood pressure checked periodically and what your numbers are showing, it is possible to spot issues earlier and, if need be, get yourself down to see your GP or a medical specialist.

Below 90/60mmHg? Somewhere around 120/80mmHg? Above 140/90mmHg? Systolic or diastolic? If you have no idea what any of these figures mean, then reading this on the dangers of high blood pressure, and how to reduce it, may well be valuable.

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Ways to get your blood pressure checked

There are lots of ways you can get checked. You can go to your GP (although obviously many are currently restricted by Covid-19) or local pharmacy. It is possible to buy relatively accurate home-test kits nowadays. Blood pressure checks are also part of the [NHS Health Check health 'MOT'](#) offered in England to those aged 40 to 74 (again Covid-19, permitting).

Then it is worth checking if your workplace offers testing. Blood Pressure UK uses Know Your Numbers! Week in September to encourage employers to get involved by setting up special 'pressure stations', but, clearly, not all workplaces offer this.

If yours does it will often be through your occupational health department, perhaps as part of wider health and wellbeing checks or health promotion initiatives. So, don't be shy about asking. And if it's not offered, why not suggest it within in your next staff feedback survey?

Tips on how to reduce high blood pressure

Finally, if you've got checked and it shows a high reading, what can you do about it? Clearly, first, it makes sense to talk to your GP (probably virtually initially in the current climate) to get an expert opinion and whether, say, medication is needed.

However, there are relatively easy lifestyle changes that can also help. Reducing your salt intake, for example, eating more fruit and vegetables, keeping to a healthy weight and (sorry) cutting down on alcohol [can all be beneficial](#).

While there is some truth in the stereotype of red-faced, overweight middle-aged men being at risk, bear in mind that high blood pressure can be a risk for anyone, at any age, especially if they're overweight. In fact, Blood Pressure UK estimates that nearly as many women (26%) as men (31%) have high blood pressure. It can, too, run in families and is more common among people of black African or black Caribbean descent.

Along with weight loss and a better diet, it is well recognised that exercise – so giving your heart a bit of a workout – can lower blood pressure. Especially if you're working from home, it therefore makes sense to try to build regular activity into your day, whether that's getting out for a walk or even a run at lunchtime or a cycle ride after work; whatever works.

It can be valuable to step back and reflect on whether your attitude and approach to work is working to your disadvantage, and not just around blood pressure but general healthiness too. Long-hours, high-pressure, overly-sedentary working life is not good for your health, or sustainable in the long term or doing your blood pressure any favours.

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