Blood pressure
Heart Information Series Number 4
This is one of the booklets in the Heart Information Series. For a complete list of booklets, see page 42.

We welcome your comments on this booklet. Please fill in the feedback form on page 57.

We update this booklet regularly. However, you may find more recent information on our website bhf.org.uk.
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About this booklet

This booklet is for people with high blood pressure, and for their family and friends. It explains:

- what high blood pressure is
- why it is so important to bring your blood pressure down to a normal level, and
- what you can do to help lower your blood pressure.

It also describes the medicines that your doctor may give you to help lower your blood pressure.

This booklet is not a substitute for the advice your doctor or cardiologist (heart specialist) may give you based on his or her knowledge of your condition.
But I don’t feel ill

High blood pressure – also known as hypertension – rarely makes people feel ill. It can cause headaches in a very small number of people, but only if their blood pressure is very high.

Problems with sight, breathlessness and nose bleeds can sometimes be a sign of high blood pressure. But the only way of knowing if you have hypertension is to have your blood pressure measured.
Why is high blood pressure harmful?

To put it very plainly, the higher your blood pressure, the shorter your life expectancy. People with high blood pressure run a higher risk of having a stroke (which damages the brain) or a heart attack. If left untreated for a long time, high blood pressure can lead to kidney failure and even damage your sight. It can also make the heart abnormally large and less efficient (a condition called ‘left ventricular hypertrophy’). This can lead to heart failure, which is when the pumping action of the heart becomes less effective.

If you have high blood pressure, reducing your blood pressure can lower your risk of having a heart attack. We give information in this booklet on the different ways of lowering blood pressure.

Myra?

You’re not alone. About four in every ten people in England either have high blood pressure or are being treated for high blood pressure. But you are luckier than many because at least you know you have it, and so you can take steps to try and reduce it. Nearly a third of people with high blood pressure are not being treated.
What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the pressure of the blood in your arteries – the tubes that take the blood away from your heart to the rest of your body. Obviously, you need a certain amount of pressure to keep the blood flowing. High blood pressure develops if the walls of the larger arteries lose their natural elasticity and become rigid, and the smaller blood vessels become narrower (constrict).

Your heart is a pump that beats by contracting and then relaxing. The pressure of blood flowing through the arteries varies at different times in the heartbeat cycle.

- The highest pressure, known as systolic pressure, is the pressure when the beat or contraction of your heart forces blood round your body.
- The lowest pressure, diastolic pressure, is the pressure between heartbeats when the heart is resting.

Blood pressure is measured in millimetres of mercury (shortened to ‘mmHg’). A blood-pressure reading gives two numbers. The first number is the systolic pressure and the second is the diastolic pressure. (For information on how a blood-pressure measurement is taken, see page 13).