

Understanding Your Blood Pressure

TV commercials are always cautioning us to "know our numbers". Bad numbers can foretell bad things for our bodies, and this is especially true with your blood pressure. But you can have those numbers totally memorized and they won't do you any good unless you understand what they mean.

What is Blood Pressure?

Your heart functions like a pump. Every time it beats, it forces blood through your veins and arteries (*circulatory system*). As the blood is being pumped, it pushes against the walls of your circulatory system and creates pressure. Doctors measure this pressure to determine whether or not it is within a normal range.

How Blood Pressure is Measured

There are two measurements that make up your blood pressure reading.

- '*Systolic*' means the pressure that is exerted when your heart is in the pumping phase.
- '*Diastolic*' pressure is the pressure when your heart is at rest waiting to begin the next pumping phase.

These measurements are made in 'millimeters of mercury' (mmHg). The systolic measurement is given first, followed by the diastolic. If, for example, your systolic number was 120, and your diastolic number was 80, the doctor would say your blood pressure was "one-twenty over eighty", it would be written in your chart as '120/80'.

Blood pressure is measured by a medical device called a '*sphygmomanometer*'. You don't have to remember that word. Most people just call it a BP (blood pressure) cuff. Here is the process that is used to measure your BP:

1. A cuff is placed around your upper arm and fastened with Velcro fasteners.
2. A stethoscope is placed between the cuff and your arm.
3. Your medical practitioner squeezes a bulb that inflates the cuff and tightens it against your arm until the circulation is cut off.
4. While the cuff is slowly being deflated, your medical practitioner listens with the stethoscope until the blood is heard flowing again.
5. Depending upon the type of blood pressure device being used, your numbers are read from a dial, digital readout, or thermometer-like glass tube filled with mercury.

What is 'Good' and 'Bad' Blood Pressure

You hear the terms "good and bad blood pressure" a lot. These terms actually refer to 'high, low, and normal' blood pressure. Here are the standard blood pressure guidelines. Be aware these numbers are only guidelines and your blood pressure readings and requirements may be different. You should always speak with your medical practitioner about this and all other health matters.

- Low Blood Pressure: 90 over 60 (90/60) or less.
- Normal Blood Pressure: At least 91 over 60 (91/60), but less than 120 over 80 (120/80).
- Moderately High Blood Pressure: Higher than 120 over 80 (120/80), and less than 140 over 90 (140/90), If your blood pressure is within this range, you may fall into the category called '*pre-hypertension*'. This means your blood pressure is on the high end of the normal range and you should see a doctor to discuss ways to get those numbers down.
- High Blood Pressure: 140 over 90 (140/90), or higher, means you may have high blood pressure (*hypertension*). See your doctor as soon as you can to discuss how to get your BP numbers under control.

Dangers of High Blood Pressure

Uncontrolled high blood pressure is a serious condition. Because it can cause damage over years, without showing any obvious symptoms to the person having the condition, it is often called the "*silent killer*". Uncontrolled high blood pressure can damage your arteries, cause weak pockets (anuyerisims) in your arteries that could burst and cause internal bleeding, cause coronary artery disease, and even lead to stroke or heart attack.

Dangers of Low Blood Pressure

Low blood pressure indicates that the heart and the brain are not getting enough oxygen-rich blood. This can result in dizziness, fainting, and mental confusion. All of these are potentially life-threatening depending on where you are, and what you are doing, when the symptoms appear. If you have low blood pressure, you should see your medical professional as soon as possible and discuss ways to boost your blood pressure into the normal range.

Your Next Step

Know your numbers! Get your blood pressure checked by a medical professional, and discuss ways to keep your blood pressure in the normal range so you can ward off the effects of the *silent killer*'