

# Many Americans wrongly assume they understand what normal blood pressure is—and that false confidence can be deadly

February 20 2023, by Wändi Bruine de Bruin and Mark Huffman

## Blood pressure categories and what they mean

Understanding blood pressure numbers and knowing what range is normal – versus not – is critical to heart health.

Blood Pressure Category	Systolic mm Hg (upper number)	and/or	Diastolic mm Hg (lower number)
Normal	Less than 120	and	Less than 80
Elevated	120-129	and	Less than 80
High blood pressure (Hypertension), Stage 1	130-139	or	80-89
High blood pressure (Hypertension), Stage 2	140 or higher	or	90 or higher
Hypertensive crisis (consult your doctor immediately)	Higher than 180	and/or	Higher than 120

Credit: The Conversation

Stunning as it may sound, nearly half of Americans ages 20 years and

up—or more than 122 million people—have high blood pressure, according to a [2023 report from the American Heart Association](#). And even if your numbers are normal right now, they are [likely to increase as you age](#); more than three-quarters of Americans age 65 and older have high blood pressure.

Also known as hypertension, high [blood pressure](#) is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

Our research has found that most Americans don't know the normal or healthy range for blood pressure—yet strikingly, they think they do. And that is cause for serious concern.

We are a [health communications expert](#) and [a cardiologist](#). [Together with our health communication collaborators](#), we surveyed more than 6,500 Americans about their knowledge of blood pressure. They were recruited through the [Understanding America Study](#), a nationally representative sample of U.S. residents.

In our new study, published in January 2023, we found that [64% expressed confidence in their understanding of blood pressure numbers](#)—but only 39% actually knew what normal or healthy blood pressure is.

## **False confidence, deadly consequences**

Such false confidence can be harmful because it may prevent people from seeking care for high blood pressure. After all, if you think it's normal, why bother talking to your doctor about your blood pressure?

Part of the reason for this overconfidence begins in the doctor's office. Typically, a nurse brings over a blood pressure cuff, straps it on your upper arm and takes a reading. The nurse may announce the result, remove the cuff and record it for the doctor.

When the doctor arrives, the session may well move on to other matters without a word about the blood pressure reading. This likely happens because your doctor wants to focus on how you're feeling and why you're there. But as a result, you may leave your appointment thinking your blood pressure is fine, even if it's not.

About 70% of Americans will [have high blood pressure in their lifetimes](#). What's more, only 1 in 4 patients with hypertension [have their blood pressure under control](#). And because high blood pressure usually has no symptoms, [you can have it without knowing it](#).

To lower your risk of heart attacks and strokes, it's critical to understand your blood pressure readings. This is especially true for patients with conditions such as heart disease, kidney disease and diabetes.

## What the numbers mean

Blood pressure [is reported with two numbers](#). The first number is your [systolic blood pressure](#); it measures the pressure in arteries when the heart beats. The second number, your [diastolic blood pressure](#), measures the pressure in your arteries between heartbeats.

[Normal or healthy blood pressure](#) is less than 120/80 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg) for adults. This is a unit of measurement that stems from early blood pressure monitors, which looked at how far your blood pressure could push a column of liquid mercury. For most patients, lower tends to be better.

Stage 1 hypertension, which is the lower stage of high blood pressure, begins at 130/80. Stage 2 hypertension, which is the more severe stage of [high blood pressure](#), begins at 140/90. Both numbers are critically important, because every increase of 20 millimeters of mercury in systolic blood pressure, or 10 in [diastolic blood pressure](#), doubles a

person's chances [of dying from a heart attack or stroke](#).

## 10 tips for healthier blood pressure

To avoid false confidence, ask about your blood pressure at every doctor's visit, and find out what the numbers mean. If your blood pressure is above the normal or healthy range, then the American Heart Association recommends the following 10 tips.

1. Talk with your doctor. [If your blood pressure is high](#), ask your doctor about strategies for lowering it, and how you can track your blood pressure at home.
2. Eat a heart-healthy diet. Vegetables, fruit, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, skinless poultry and fish, nuts and legumes, and olive oil [are all good for your heart](#). Red meat, saturated and trans fats and ultraprocessed foods are unhealthy for your heart.
3. Cut back on salt, which increases blood pressure. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend [no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day](#)—that's less than one teaspoon—but the U.S. Food and Drug Administration reports that the [average American takes in about 3,400 milligrams daily](#), roughly 50% more than recommended. Even if you don't add any salt to your meals, you may still get too much from ultraprocessed foods. One serving of canned chicken noodle soup [has 680 milligrams of sodium](#). One Big Mac from McDonald's [has 1,010 milligrams of sodium](#).
4. Limit your alcohol use. Whether it's beer, wine or spirits, [alcohol increases your blood pressure](#). It's better to not drink alcohol, but if you do, observe the limits recommended by the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#). For women, that's one drink per day

at the very most. For men, it's two drinks per day at most. One drink is 12 ounces of beer, 4 ounces of wine, 1.5 ounces of 80-proof spirits or 1 ounce of 100-proof spirits.

5. Be more physically active. Just two and a half hours per week of physical activity [can help lower blood pressure](#). For example, that's a 30-minute walk five days a week. You might also switch up your physical activity by swimming, lifting weights, doing yoga or going dancing.
6. Maintain a healthy weight. Even losing a few pounds can [help manage high blood pressure in people who are overweight](#). Ask your doctor about a healthy approach to weight loss.
7. Manage stress, which is bad for your blood pressure. While stress relief [doesn't always lower blood pressure](#), bringing down your stress level can help you feel better. The Mayo Clinic recommends [several ways to manage stress](#), including learning to say no sometimes, spending time with family and friends and meditating.
8. If you smoke, vape or both: Quit now. Both are bad for [your heart and blood vessels](#) and [contribute to high blood pressure](#). Quitting smoking may reduce your heart disease risk to [nearly the same level](#) as people who never smoked. And the benefits of quitting start right away. A recent study found that after just 12 weeks, people who quit [had lower blood pressure](#) than when they were still smoking. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has [recommendations for programs and medication](#) that can help you quit.
9. Take medication, which is often recommended for people with stage 2 hypertension, and for some with stage 1 hypertension,

including those who also have [heart disease](#), kidney disease or diabetes. Most patients [need two to three medications to lower blood pressure](#) to normal or healthy levels. A recent meta-analysis demonstrated that lowering [systolic blood pressure](#) by 5 mm Hg through medication [reduces the risk of major cardiovascular events by about 10%](#), irrespective of baseline blood pressure or previous diagnosis of cardiovascular disease.

10. Track your blood pressure at home. The American Heart Association recommends an [automatic, validated cuff-style monitor](#) that goes on your upper arm. A record of readings taken over time can help your doctor adjust your treatments as needed.

High blood pressure is a silent killer. Being proactive and knowing your numbers can be a lifesaver.

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