

What is hypertension?

Hypertension, known as high blood pressure is a condition where blood vessels have a persistently high pressure. Everyone has blood pressure. Blood pressure is simply the pressure put on the walls of the blood vessels as the heart pumps blood through them. Blood pressure varies from minute to minute; going up when the heart beats rapidly, when we are excited or worried, and going down when we rest. In some people, blood pressure goes up too high and stays that way.

Blood pressure is written as two numbers, such as 112/78 mm Hg. The top (systolic) number is the pressure when the heart beats. The bottom (diastolic) number is the pressure when the heart rests between beats. Normal adult blood pressure 120 mmHg/80 mmHg. Hypertension is a systolic blood pressure equal to or above 130 mm Hg and/or diastolic blood pressure equal to or above 80 mm Hg.



How will I know if I have hypertension?

High blood pressure by itself seldom makes you feel ill or gives rise to symptoms. That is why it is sometimes referred to as the “silent killer”. 1 in 3 Jamaicans have high blood pressure and most people don’t know they have it. You can tell if you have high blood pressure only by the use of a blood pressure machine (called a sphygmomanometer), not by the way you feel.



Blood pressure should be checked regularly by health professionals.

If symptoms do occur, they can include early morning headaches, nosebleeds, irregular heart rhythms, vision changes, and buzzing in the ears.

What are the complications of hypertension?

In view of the absence of symptoms, hypertension it is usually undetected until complications arise. When high blood pressure is not treated, it can increase the risk of:

- chest pain (angina)
- stroke
- kidney disease and kidney failure
- irregular heart beat
- enlargement of the heart and cardiac failure
- heart attack
- heart disease – this includes heart failure, thickening and enlargement of the heart because of elevated pressure, narrowing or closure of coronary arteries (blood vessels that carry oxygen to the heart)

High blood pressure, detected and treated early before complications arise, is compatible with a long and productive life.

Am I at higher risk for hypertension?

There are risk factors that increase your chances of developing HBP. Some you can control, and some you can’t. Behavioural and lifestyle risks you can control include:

- Inadequate physical activity
- High alcohol consumption
- Smoking and tobacco use
- Diet high in salt, sugar, saturated fat and trans fat
- Excess body weight, overweight and obesity
- Uncontrolled Diabetes
- High cholesterol
- Stress

Those you can’t control include family history

What can I do to prevent hypertension?



- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Read nutrition labels to choose healthier foods lower in salt (sodium) fats, and sweeteners (including sugar)



- Eat less salt by cutting down on table salt, salted meats, sauces foods. Aim for 1 tsp salt per day.
- Exercise regularly. Be more active aiming for at least 30 mins of exercise daily. Go for brisk walks, jog, swimming or cycling.



- Reduce stress by doing things that relax you. Stress results

from tension and emotional upset. When you are under stress your blood pressure increases.



- Limit alcohol intake. Remember alcohol has calories and the heavy use of alcohol can raise blood pressure. Limit alcohol to no more than 2 drinks a day for males and 1 drink a day for females.



- Stop smoking. Smoking cigarettes leads to diseases of the heart and blood vessels and increases the complications of hypertension.

How do I manage hypertension?

If you are diagnosed with high blood pressure, it can rarely be cured, but it is controllable and must be managed for life.

- ◆  Loose weight if you are overweight
- ◆ Maintain a healthy lifestyle through diet and regular exercise (see above)
- ◆ Eat a healthy diet low in saturated and trans fats and rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Aim to consume less than 1,500 mg/day of sodium (1/2 teaspoon salt)



- ◆ Limit alcohol intake, caffeine intake, eliminate cigarette smoking and avoid second hand smoke
- ◆ Control stress
- ◆ Avoid illicit drugs and herbal supplements
- ◆ Take medication as prescribed by your medical professional
- ◆ Talk to your doctor about other medications (over the counter and prescribed) you may be taking
- ◆ Check your blood pressure regularly



You can check your blood pressure and/or see the doctor at our weekly Hypertension Clinic.

For further information on hypertension, please call or visit The Heart Foundation of Jamaica



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