

Blood Pressure, What's the Big Deal?

By Lisa Schilling RN

Many people ask what blood pressure numbers mean. It is measured by listening through a stethoscope, to the sound of the heartbeat, as pressure is applied with a cuff to impede the blood flow. The top number is determined as the cuff pressure is released and the heartbeat is first heard, the second number is noted when the heartbeat is no longer heard. The first, or upper, number measures the pressure in your arteries when your heart beats (systolic pressure). The second, or lower, number measures the pressure in your arteries between beats (diastolic pressure). Your blood pressure is normal if it's below 120/70. However, even lower is a better goal. A reading of above 140/90 (either number) would be cause for a follow up.

Blood pressure is determined by the amount of blood your heart *pumps* and the amount of *resistance* to blood flow in your arteries. Over time untreated high blood pressure can cause your heart to become more rigid and even enlarged, therefore it cannot pump as efficiently. The more blood your heart pumps and the *narrower your arteries*, the higher your blood pressure. Uncontrolled high blood pressure increases your risk of serious health problems. It often goes undetected since most people have no signs or symptoms. There are two types of high blood pressure. **Primary (essential) hypertension** is found in 90 to 95 percent of high blood pressure cases in adults, and there's **no identifiable cause**. This type tends to develop gradually over many years. **Secondary hypertension** is the other 5 to 10 percent of high blood pressure cases and is **caused by an** underlying condition. This type tends to appear suddenly.

The excessive pressure on your artery walls can damage your blood

vessels, as well as organs in your body. The higher your blood pressure and the longer it goes uncontrolled, the greater the damage. This can lead to heart failure, heart attack, aneurysm, stroke, damage to arteries, weakened kidney vessels, damage to eye vessels, trouble with memory or understanding, and metabolic syndrome.

Some uncontrollable risk factors include age, race and family history. Family history is a huge indicator of potential problems. This predisposition means you will need to take extra precautions. Some controllable risk factors are your weight, activity level, not smoking, limiting alcohol, reducing stress, and diet related issues like cutting salt and getting adequate amounts of potassium and Vitamin D. Lifestyle changes are important but aren't always enough. In addition, your doctor may recommend medication to help. Be sure to monitor your blood pressure at home, and take your medications properly. Along with that there are some supplements that may help, these include: Alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), Psyllium (Metamucil), Calcium, Cocoa, Cod-liver oil, Coenzyme Q-10, Omega-3 fatty acids, and Garlic.

High blood pressure isn't a problem that you can treat and then ignore. It's a condition you need to manage for the rest of your life. Sticking to lifestyle changes can be difficult — especially if you don't see or feel any symptoms. It may help to enlist the support of your family and friends.