High blood pressure (hypertension)

What your numbers mean, why it matters and what you can do

What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing on the walls of your arteries. It is written as two numbers, such as 128/82: the pressure when your heart beats, then between beats. High blood pressure means it stays raised over time. Most people feel well, so the only way to know is to have it checked.

Your numbers explained

Not raised	Stage 1	Stage 2	Severe
Clinic below 140/90	Clinic 140/90–159/99	Clinic from 160/100	Clinic 180/120+
Home below 135/85	Home 135/85–149/94	Home from 150/95	Check same day

Home limits are lower than clinic ones. One high reading alone is not a diagnosis.

Why it matters

Over years it strains the heart and blood vessels. Bringing it down lowers the risk of:

- Heart attack, angina
- Kidney disease
- Stroke, dementia
- Eye damage
- Heart failure
- Leg artery disease

What can raise blood pressure

Salt and diet

Too much salt, too little fruit and veg

Weight and activity

Carrying extra weight, not moving much

Alcohol and caffeine

Lots of alcohol, coffee or energy drinks

Other conditions

Kidney disease, diabetes, sleep apnoea

Some medicines

Some painkillers, decongestants, steroids

Often no single cause

Age and genes play a part (essential hypertension)

Who is more at risk

Age over 60 · **Family history** · **Black African or Caribbean family** · **Overweight** · **Diabetes** · **Kidney disease** · **Sleep apnoea** · **Inactive lifestyle**

Please turn over for what you can do, what the doctor will do and when to get help

What you can do

Cut down on salt. Under 6 g a day (a teaspoon). Watch bread and ready meals.

Eat well. More fruit, vegetables, beans and wholegrains.

Move more. 150 minutes a week of activity that warms you up.

Keep to a healthy weight. Even a small weight loss helps.

Drink less alcohol. Up to 14 units a week, spread out. Less caffeine too.

Stop smoking. It harms your heart and arteries. Free help is available.

What the doctor will do

1. Check your blood pressure carefully, in both arms, more than once
2. Confirm it with home readings or a 24-hour monitor
3. Check your heart, kidneys and eyes, and your heart and stroke risk
4. Agree a plan with you: lifestyle, medicines if needed, regular reviews

Keep taking tablets when well. Home aim on treatment: below 135/85 (145/85 if 80+).

Call 999 if you have

- Chest pain or tightness
- Stroke signs: face, arm or speech
- Severe breathlessness
- Sudden confusion or a fit
- Swelling of the lips, tongue or throat

Contact us the same day if

- A reading of 180/120 or more after resting
- Severe headache or blurred vision
- Dizzy or faint after a medicine change

Working out your home average

1 Measure

Morning and evening for 7 days. Ignore day 1.

Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
AM	☐	■	■	■	■	■	■
PM	☐	■	■	■	■	■	■

= 12 readings to use

2 Add up

Add the top numbers from days 2–7, then the bottom ones.

142 + 136 + … = **1,656**
88 + 84 + … = **1,032**

3 Divide

Divide each total by the number of readings.

1,656 ÷ 12 = **138**
1,032 ÷ 12 = **86**

Average: 138/86

Rest 5 minutes, then take 2 readings a minute apart. An average of 135/85 or more is raised.

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Out of hours
NHS 24: call 111
More help: bloodpressureuk.org

Based on NICE NG136, NICE CKS Hypertension (2026) and BMJ Best Practice. October 2026.