

High blood pressure (Hypertension)

What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the amount of pressure on the walls of blood vessels as the heart pumps blood through the body. Normal blood pressure for a child is based on age, sex and height. There are two numbers when the blood pressure is measured.

120 The top number is the **systolic pressure**. This is when the heart pumps blood to the body.

80 The lower number is the **diastolic pressure**. This is when the heart rests and fills with blood.



High blood pressure is when one or both of these numbers are higher than normal. This is called hypertension. One high blood pressure reading does not mean your child has high blood pressure. Blood pressure should be rechecked at several visits before high blood pressure is diagnosed.

Your child may not have any signs or symptoms of high blood pressure. When the blood pressure is very high, headaches, fainting, nosebleeds, and seizures can happen.

What causes high blood pressure?

There are many things that can cause blood pressure to be high at any one time, including:

- Emotions such as fear, anger, or feeling nervous.
- Time of day.
- Exercise.
- Moving the arm while the blood pressure is being taken.
- Wrong size of the blood pressure cuff.

Essential or primary hypertension is when the cause of the high blood pressure is not known. Common risk factors include:

- A family history of high blood pressure.
- High cholesterol, obesity, inactivity, and smoking.
- African-Americans have an increased risk of high blood pressure.
- Males have a higher risk than females.

As children get older, essential hypertension is more common than secondary hypertension.

Secondary hypertension is when there is a known cause for the high blood pressure, like chronic kidney disease or some medicines. Your child's doctor may order tests to look for a cause for the high blood pressure.

Why is it important to treat high blood pressure?

High blood pressure can cause a lot of problems, like:

- Hardening of the blood vessels. This is called coronary artery disease.
- Heart attack or an enlarged heart.
- Stroke.
- Kidney damage that could lead to kidney failure.
- Loss of vision and blindness.

How is high blood pressure treated?

Most often, treatment will start with changes in activity and diet. These are called lifestyle changes. Things that will help your child the most are:

- Losing weight, if your child is overweight.
- Getting more physical activity.
- Eating a healthy diet that is low in salt and fat.

Ask your child's health care provider for more information on healthy diet choices or programs to help with weight loss. Talking with a dietitian may be helpful.

If lifestyle changes do not lower blood pressure, medicine may be needed. There are many different kinds of medicines. They work in different ways. Sometimes it takes more than one medicine to lower blood pressure.

With all blood pressure medicines it is important to know these things:

- Do not stop the medicines even if your child feels good or their blood pressure is in normal range. The medicines only lower blood pressure while they are being taken. If you stop the medicine, your child's blood pressure will go back up. Some medicines will make your child very sick if they are stopped suddenly.
- Ask your child's doctor or nurse if there are any medicines your child should not take. Over-the-counter medicines like decongestants may increase blood pressure.
- Make sure to keep all appointments. It is important for your child to be checked to see if the medicine is working. Blood tests may be needed with some medicines.

ALERT: Call your child's doctor, nurse, or clinic if you have any questions or concerns or if your child has:

- Headaches that happen often or are very bad.
- Blurry vision.
- Special health care needs that were not covered by this information.

This sheet was created to help you care for your child or family member. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up.