



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: HYPERTENSION

Millions of Americans have high blood pressure, also known as hypertension. Blood pressure is the force of blood pulsing against the walls of blood vessels called arteries. Hypertension occurs when the pressure of the blood against the artery walls is higher than normal.

Hypertension usually causes *no* symptoms. An isolated high blood pressure reading now and then does no harm. *Long-term*, continual high blood pressure, though, increases the risk of stroke, heart attack, and kidney disease.

Blood pressure readings consist of two parts: The first number, measured when the heart beats, is called the *systolic* pressure. The second number, measured between beats (when the heart is at rest), is called the *diastolic* pressure. A blood pressure reading of 140/90 or above is considered “hypertension” for an adult. A blood pressure reading below 120/80 is considered normal for an adult. A blood pressure reading between these numbers is considered “prehypertension” which rarely requires medication.

The exact cause of high blood pressure is often unknown. When the cause is not known, a person is said to have "primary" or "essential" hypertension. Hypertension is sometimes caused by a specific disease of the kidneys or central nervous system. This is called secondary hypertension. Whatever the cause, controlling high blood pressure is essential.

MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO CONTROL YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE:

1. Follow a low-salt diet. If you decrease salt in your diet slowly, you will not miss the taste.
2. If you are overweight, work steadily on losing weight. Follow a low-fat diet. Eat more fruits and vegetables.
3. Exercise regularly. If you are out of shape, start *slowly*. Choose an exercise program that you enjoy. *Moving* exercise, such as walking, jogging, swimming, biking, etc. is best. A simple 20- to 30-minute walk each day can be very beneficial.
4. If you smoke, quit. Definitely!
5. If these safe, first steps do not lower your blood pressure, medicines are available that lower blood pressure and reduce risks of heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease. But, continue the “self-help” measures above even if you take medicine. You may need less medicine.
6. If your provider prescribes blood pressure medication, take it exactly as prescribed. Never stop using a blood pressure medicine or make adjustments without seeking advice from your doctor.
7. Monitor your blood pressure at home. Many people have "white-coat syndrome" — higher blood pressure readings at the doctor's office. Blood pressure checks at home may give more accurate readings. Sit down in a quiet room, relax five or ten minutes, then check your blood pressure. Digital blood pressure monitors that do not require use of a stethoscope are inexpensive and available at many stores.