

# **How and Why to Check Your Blood Pressure at Home**

**By Sam Pollock**

Your blood pressure is very important to monitor for both you and your physician. Like the plumbing system for any house or apartment, if the pressure is too high it will cause damage to your body. High blood pressure increases your risk of stroke, heart attack, heart failure, kidney disease, pregnancy complications, vision loss and sexual dysfunction (for both men and women). Because of this it is vital to properly monitor blood pressure between visits with your provider.

## **Why check your blood pressure at home?**

Checking your blood pressure at home will give you your most accurate average blood pressure and is critical for helping your doctor make a diagnosis. Your blood pressure when measured in a doctor's office can often be falsely elevated, a phenomenon called "white coat" hypertension. It's ok for your blood pressure to be temporarily high because you're nervous at the doctor's office. It's not ok for it to be consistently high at home. This is why many doctors will ask you to track your blood pressure at home if it is high in the office.

## **Tips for checking your blood pressure at home**

- Get the right tool to measure your blood pressure. There are wrist cuffs, finger cuffs and ankle cuffs, but an arm cuff is recommended because it is the most accurate.
- Make sure your cuff is the right size for your arm. If it is too small it will measure your blood pressure as falsely elevated, and if it is too large you will get falsely low blood pressure readings.
- Accuracy is important, and it's not guaranteed out of the box. If you have never tested your blood pressure cuff for accuracy, or if it has been over a year since you last checked, many doctor's offices will let you bring in your blood pressure cuff to check it against their cuffs free of charge. This is also called calibration.
- Keep a written log of your blood pressure that you can review with your doctor. Make sure to check your pressure at the same time each day. For the most accurate results, record two readings a few minutes apart.
- Avoid activities or consuming substances that will artificially elevate your reading like smoking, drinking caffeine or alcohol, or exercising within 30 minutes of checking. Empty your bladder beforehand and avoid talking with others while using the cuff.
- The best way to position yourself is to sit in a chair with your back supported. Rest your arm with the cuff on a table at heart level. The cuff should be on your bare skin. No sleeves or cloth should be between your skin and the cuff.

## **What do the numbers mean?**

Your blood pressure is measured as two numbers. The top number is your systolic blood pressure (this is the pressure when your heart beats.) The bottom number is your diastolic blood pressure (this is the

pressure when your heart refills.) Your ideal blood pressure is less than 120/70. Talk to your provider if you are regularly getting readings above 140/90.

If you have a reading higher than 180/120 after checking it twice you could be having a hypertensive crisis. If you have any chest pain, shortness of breath, weakness, vision changes, dizziness or vomiting you should call 911. If you have no symptoms, you should call your doctor right away.

For more guidance on your blood pressure readings, go to [heart.org/HBP](http://heart.org/HBP).

Checking your blood pressure at home is easy and will help you and your doctor decrease your risk of heart disease and stroke.

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