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## **February is Heart Health Month: Let's Talk About High Blood Pressure**

February is American Heart Month, a time when all people are encouraged to focus on their cardiovascular health. [Cardiovascular disease](#) is a term for all diseases that affect the heart and/or blood vessels, while [heart disease](#) is a term for the variety of conditions that primarily affect the heart. Types of heart disease include (but are not limited to): [coronary artery disease \(CAD\)](#), [heart failure](#), [cardiac arrhythmias](#), and [heart valve disease](#).

High blood pressure is the most common cause of heart disease. Elevated blood pressure can cause significant health problems, like: [chronic kidney disease](#), [stroke](#), [cognitive decline and dementia](#), [vision decline or loss](#), [pregnancy complications](#), and many different types of heart disease.

A healthy blood pressure is essential for overall wellness. Keep reading to learn more about how to manage your blood pressure and how it affects your overall health.

### **High Blood Pressure**

[High blood pressure](#) (or hypertension) is a medical condition that occurs when the pressure of the blood in your arteries and other blood vessels is too high. This causes the heart to work harder, ultimately leading to heart and body system damage.

High blood pressure is often called the “silent disease”, as the only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to measure it. If high blood pressure causes symptoms (including, but not limited to: chest pain, headache, shortness of breath, and vision changes), this usually means your blood pressure is dangerously elevated and medical attention must be sought immediately.

Your blood pressure constantly changes throughout the day and based on your activities. Having blood pressure consistently above normal range may indicate a diagnosis of high blood pressure. Oftentimes, before a diagnosis of high blood pressure or being prescribed blood pressure medication, your healthcare provider will request you monitor and log your blood pressures for a period of time to see your blood pressure trend.

There are modifiable (changeable) [risk factors](#) that can cause high blood pressure. Sedentary lifestyle (or inactive lifestyle), smoking cigarettes, alcohol consumption, obesity, and a diet high in salt, sugar, and saturated fats can increase the risk of developing high blood pressure. Some people

have [essential hypertension](#), in which there is no identifiable cause of the person's high blood pressure – their blood pressure just runs high.

Below are a few lifestyle changes that can be made to [lower and/or prevent high blood pressure](#):

- Eat a diet lower in sodium, refined sugar, and saturated/trans fats. The Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension ([DASH](#)) eating plan is a healthy diet plan proven to help people lower their blood pressure.
- [Be physically active](#). The recommended level of physical activity per week varies based on age and the presence of chronic disease. A good rule of thumb for adults without chronic disease is to aim for 30 minutes a day, 5 days per week of physical activity.
- Don't smoke cigarettes.
- Limit how much alcohol you drink. The [recommended limit](#) of alcohol consumption is no more than 1 drink a day for females and no more than 2 drinks per day for males. (However, please keep in mind that the [U.S. Surgeon General](#) reports there is no safe amount of alcohol consumption per day any gender, as even a small, infrequent consumption of alcohol can increase the risk of many different types of cancer.)

### **Measuring Blood Pressure**

The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to measure it, as high blood pressure usually has no warning signs or symptoms, and many people do not know they have it.

It is important to correctly [measure your blood pressure](#) to ensure you have accurate results. Here are some tips and tricks to make sure you are taking your blood pressure accurately:

- Don't eat or drink 30 minutes prior to taking your blood pressure.
- Empty your bladder before your reading.
- Sit in a comfortable chair with your back supported for at least 5 minutes prior to your reading.
- Put both feet on the ground and keep your legs uncrossed.
- Rest your arm with the cuff on a table at chest height.
- Make sure your blood pressure cuff is the right size. A cuff too big can create a falsely lower blood pressure, and a cuff too snug can create a falsely higher blood pressure. Ensure the cuff is bare against your skin.
- Do not talk while your blood pressure is being taken.

Other factors that can affect your blood pressure readings include:

- Anxiety or nervousness about your blood pressure being taken. Some people have “white coat syndrome”, in which the person has higher blood pressure readings in the doctor's office due to anxiety about their blood pressure being taken.
- What you ate, drank, or did before your reading. Your reading may be higher if you smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol or caffeine, or exercised within 30 minutes of having your blood pressure measured.
- Crossing your legs and letting your arm droop at your side rather than rest on a table at chest height can make your blood pressure go up.
- Your blood pressure changes throughout the day. When logging your blood pressures, try to take it at the same time every day for the most accurate results.

### **Definition of High Blood Pressure**

Your healthcare team can diagnose blood pressure and make treatment decisions based on the top (systolic) and bottom (diastolic) numbers. Most healthcare providers will use the [American Heart Association \(AHA\)](#) blood pressure guidelines, outline in the graphic below.



## Blood Pressure Categories

BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORY	SYSTOLIC mm Hg (upper number)		DIASTOLIC mm Hg (lower number)
NORMAL	LESS THAN 120	and	LESS THAN 80
ELEVATED	120 – 129	and	LESS THAN 80
HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE (HYPERTENSION) STAGE 1	130 – 139	or	80 – 89
HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE (HYPERTENSION) STAGE 2	140 OR HIGHER	or	90 OR HIGHER
HYPERTENSIVE CRISIS (consult your doctor immediately)	HIGHER THAN 180	and/or	HIGHER THAN 120

- **Normal range:** stick with heart-healthy habits like following a balanced diet and getting regular exercise.
- **Elevated:** work with your healthcare professional to determine what changes need to be made to prevent your blood pressure from increasing.
- **Hypertension Stage I:** your healthcare provider may prescribe lifestyle changes and may consider adding a medication based on your risk of heart disease or stroke.
- **Hypertension Stage II:** your healthcare provider should prescribe lifestyle changes and blood pressure medication(s).
- **Hypertensive crisis WITHOUT symptoms:** wait five minutes after your first reading and take your blood pressure again. If still elevated, contact your healthcare provider.
- **Hypertensive crisis WITH symptoms:** **this is a medical emergency – call 911 immediately.** *Symptoms of an emergent hypertensive crisis include (but are not limited to):*
  - Chest pain
  - Headache
  - Shortness of breath
  - Weakness
  - Change in vision
  - Difficulty speaking

Please keep in mind that these are general guidelines. Consult your healthcare provider about your treatment plan and goal blood pressures, as this may vary based on your medical history.

### Conclusion

By acting to lower your blood pressure, or maintain your blood pressure at a healthy level, you can help protect yourself against cardiovascular and heart disease.

### Bedford Blood Pressure Clinics

The Bedford Public Health Nurse offers blood pressure clinics at the Bedford Council on Aging (COA), 12 Mudge Way. Please check the Health Department [website](#) at <https://www.bedfordma.gov/955/Blood-Pressure-Clinics> for dates. These are walk-in clinics and residents are served on a first come, first served basis.

**Questions? Concerns?**

Should you have any questions about the materials presented herein, please contact the Public Health Nurse Jackie Barmashi at 781-275-6507 or at [jbarmashi@bedfordma.gov](mailto:jbarmashi@bedfordma.gov).