

COULD YOU HAVE HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE AND NOT KNOW IT?

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Why is persistent, elevated blood pressure a “silent killer”? Almost half of South Africans have this condition. It does not always show symptoms, yet causes heart attacks, strokes and more.



A BLOOD PRESSURE TEST CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE

Visit your local pharmacy, clinic, or General Practitioner for a quick, non-invasive blood pressure check. A sphygmomanometer is used for the test. This involves placing a cuff around your upper arm, which tightens as air is pumped into it.

The test provides two readings, for example 120/80 mm Hg, which is read as “120 over 80”. The top number shows the pressure in your arteries when your heart beats, while the bottom number shows the pressure when your heart is resting. These readings help assess your risk of developing high blood pressure and guide steps to protect your health.

According to the American Heart Association, a healthy blood pressure is below 120/80 mm Hg. If your blood pressure is higher than 130/80 mm Hg on more than two occasions, you may have hypertension, also known as high blood pressure. When identified early, high blood pressure can often be managed, and in some cases improved, through healthy lifestyle changes, supporting long-term health and quality of life.



WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HYPERTENSION?

- Headaches
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Chest pain
- Heart palpitations
- Nose bleeds



WHAT CAUSES HYPERTENSION?

Hypertension is known as the “silent killer” as it often goes undetected until it is too late. High blood pressure is thought to be genetic, so if you have a close relative with hypertension, it is especially important to pay attention to your readings. Changeable risk factors influence high blood pressure – these are our lifestyle choices. There can also be an underlying cause for hypertension, such as kidney disease, heart disease or tumours.

Which lifestyle choices are putting you at risk of high blood pressure?

According to the Mayo Clinic, the biggest risk factors for hypertension are:

- **Age** – The risk of high blood pressure increases as you age. Until about age 64, high blood pressure is more common in men. Women are more likely to develop high blood pressure after age 65.
- **Race** – High blood pressure is particularly common among people of African descent. Serious complications, such as stroke, heart attack and kidney failure, are also more common in people of African descent.
- **Being overweight or obese** – The more you weigh, the more blood you need to supply oxygen and nutrients to your tissues. As the volume of blood circulated through your blood vessels increases, so does the pressure on your artery walls.
- **Family history** – High blood pressure tends to run in families.
- **Physical inactivity** – Inactive people tend to have higher heart rates. The higher your heart rate, the harder your heart must work with each contraction and the stronger the force on your arteries. Lack of physical activity also increases the risk of being overweight.



- **High stress levels** – High levels of stress can lead to a temporary increase in blood pressure. If you try to relax by eating more, using tobacco or drinking alcohol, you may only increase your risk factors for high blood pressure.
- **Smoking** – Smoking or chewing tobacco not only causes a temporary increase in blood pressure, but the chemicals in tobacco can damage the lining of your artery walls. This can cause your arteries to narrow and increase your risk of heart disease. Second-hand smoke can also increase your risk for heart disease.

- **Excessive alcohol intake** – Over time, heavy drinking can damage your heart. Having more than one drink a day for women, or more than two drinks a day for men, may increase blood pressure and raise the risk of heart-related conditions.
- **Making unhealthy food choices** – This includes eating too much salt. A high sodium intake can cause the body to retain fluid, which may increase blood pressure.
- **Chronic conditions** – Certain long-term health conditions can increase the risk of high blood pressure. These include kidney disease, diabetes, and sleep apnoea.



REMEMBER

If you are diagnosed with hypertension and prescribed medication, it is important to take your medication exactly as prescribed and to support this with healthy lifestyle choices. Pre-hypertension and mild hypertension may improve with weight loss, healthier eating, and regular physical activity.

If lifestyle changes alone do not lower blood pressure sufficiently, anti-hypertensive medication may be prescribed. The type of medication depends on factors such as the severity of hypertension, ethnicity, other existing health conditions, and possible side effects.

