



What You Need to Know About Hypertension

Often called the “silent killer,” high blood pressure affects nearly half of U.S. adults and can strike at any age — even in people who feel healthy. By Tamekia Reece

ABOUT SIX OR SEVEN YEARS ago, Len Moon, of Atlanta, Georgia, was at a routine doctor's visit. "When the medical tech checked my blood pressure, it was 160/90," she says. "He asked, 'Do you have a headache? Do you feel tired? Do you feel...,' but I felt fine."

To confirm the reading, the technician performed the test again manually and got similar results. She was asked to monitor her blood pressure at home twice a day for two weeks. During the follow-up appointment, her blood pressure was re-measured. Because the readings remained high, Moon was officially diagnosed with hypertension (high blood pressure).

The news caught Moon off guard. Though her family had a history of high blood pressure, she didn't think it would happen to her. She was living a healthy lifestyle, eating well and exercising. She wasn't overweight, and she's relatively young.

"I always thought high blood pressure was something that came when you reached your 50s or 60s. I didn't think I would have to be worried about managing blood pressure in my 30s," says Moon, who is now 39.

Her experience isn't unusual. Almost half of adults in the U.S. (48.1% or 119.9 million) have the condition. It can affect people of all ages, including children. In 2023,



hypertension was the primary cause or at least a contributing factor in nearly 665,000 deaths in the U.S. Yet only one in four adults with hypertension has it under control. This shows that many people either don't understand the condition or its seriousness.

After a routine doctor's visit revealed elevated blood pressure, Len Moon was diagnosed with high blood pressure in her 30s, despite feeling healthy and having no obvious symptoms.

High Blood Pressure, Explained

Blood pressure is the force that occurs as your heart first pumps blood (known as systolic, the top number) and then rests between heartbeats (diastolic, the bottom number). Normal blood pressure is when

Understand Your Blood Pressure Numbers



NORMAL | Less than 120 mm Hg AND less than 80 mm Hg ✦ **ELEVATED** | 120-129 AND less than 80

**STAGE 1
HYPERTENSION:**
130-139 OR 80-89

**STAGE 2
HYPERTENSION:**
140 or higher OR 90 or higher

**SEVERE
HYPERTENSION:**
higher than 180 AND/OR higher than 120

A hypertensive emergency occurs when blood pressure is higher than 180 AND/OR higher than 120 and you experience symptoms like chest pain, back pain, shortness of breath, numbness, weakness or changes in vision.



Dr. Natalia Beridze

the systolic is less than 120 mm Hg and the diastolic is less than 80 mm Hg. Hypertension is when the systolic number is 130 or higher or the diastolic is 80 or higher.

The thing is, many people don't know they have high blood pressure. "The majority of the population is asymptomatic, which is why hypertension is referred to as the 'silent killer,'" says Leonard Pianko, MD, a cardiologist and founder of Aventura Cardiovascular Center in Aventura, Florida. "Even when individuals notice something as minor as headaches or exhaustion, they tend to attribute it to work-related stress or sleep deprivation rather than to an increase in their blood pressure."



Dr. Leonard Pianko

Looking back, Moon sees she overlooked symptoms. "I used to feel tired in the middle of the day, like somebody turned the battery off in my back. Sometimes I'd get really bad headaches and need to go to sleep. Those are things that I didn't realize were associated with blood pressure."

Another reason hypertension can be tricky is that it has many risk factors, including ones that are out of a person's control, such as age, family history and race. Gender also plays a role. "Men generally develop high blood pressure at an earlier age, whereas women experience an increase in high blood pressure after menopause," says Dr. Pianko. Some women may also develop the condition during pregnancy.

Other risk factors can be changed, including being overweight or obese, unhealthy eating habits, high-sodium diets, lack of exercise, excessive stress, smoking, heavy drinking, diabetes and sleep apnea.

Sometimes, as Moon experienced, elevated blood pressure can occur even with healthy habits. When blood pressure stays high, it forces the heart and blood vessels to work harder. Over time, this can lead to many issues, including heart attack, heart disease,

stroke, vision loss, kidney damage and other serious complications. Research now shows that high blood pressure is also linked to having a higher risk of cognitive decline and dementia.

That's why it's important to get your blood pressure checked at least once a year in a health care setting. For diagnosis, a health care provider will determine your average blood pressure based on readings taken on at least two occasions.

The Role of Medication

"Once a hypertension diagnosis is made, individualized treatment depends on the stage of hypertension, and may include lifestyle changes, medications or both," says Natalia Beridze, MD, a cardiologist at Manhattan Cardiology in New York City.



Hypertension medications may include diuretics, beta-blockers, ACE inhibitors, calcium channel blockers and others. Often, people need more than one type to control their blood pressure, as medications work in different ways to lower blood pressure and reduce the risks of serious complications.

However, many people don't take meds consistently. "Hypertension is treated with daily intake of anti-hypertensive medications to keep blood pressure numbers steadily at an optimal range," says Dr. Beridze. Skipping doses or starting and stopping the meds causes blood pressure to fluctuate between normal and high, which can be more harmful than blood pressure that is consistently high, she explains.

One reason people may not take their blood pressure medications consistently, or even start them at all, is that they've experienced or heard about possible side effects. Some hypertension drugs may cause frequent urination, headaches, muscle cramps, dizziness, swelling in the lower legs and hands, chronic cough or other issues.

However, the health threats of untreated high blood pressure are much worse than





the medication side effects. Also, side effects vary from person to person, and some people experience very few or none at all. For example, Moon says she's been very lucky to have only minimal side effects.

If you experience side effects that interfere with your daily life or are unbearable, Dr. Pianko says don't stop taking the medication on your own. Instead, speak with your doctor to find an option that is more tolerable for your body chemistry.

It's a Lifestyle

Lifestyle changes are always recommended for managing hypertension because they can improve how well blood pressure medications work, notes Dr. Pianko. Even without medication, healthier habits can help reduce high blood pressure (or possibly prevent it in the first place). "Lifestyle modifications include reducing salt intake, increasing physical activity, maintaining a healthy body weight, minimizing stress and avoiding smoking," says Dr. Pianko.

Food and exercise can be a struggle for some people. Although Moon ate a mostly healthy diet before her hypertension diagnosis, giving up some favorite foods has been tough. "To me, life isn't as 'fun' when you're managing high blood pressure because you have to watch what you eat, literally," she says. Still, she does what she needs to do: reads labels, chooses low- or no-sodium options, eats more vegetables and cooks at home more often instead of going out to eat.

As for exercise, she fell out of her workout routine during the COVID-19 shutdowns and after some recent personal challenges. But she's working to get back on track.


One area where Moon excels is stress management. "I'm in therapy every week, and I changed the way I think about things," she says. "Before, I used to try to control every aspect of everything around me. Now, I try to pick my battles and choose the less stressful option."

Moon has also built a support system, connecting with others who have hypertension to exchange advice, tips and recipes. She has regular girls' nights out with friends to unwind. And probably most helpful of all is that she's switched to a "life-work balance" mentality instead of the other way around.

Looking Forward

Getting blood pressure under control — and keeping it there — can be challenging, but it's possible. "While hypertension cannot be cured, it can be controlled by medication and lifestyle," says Dr. Pianko. This combination is how Moon has successfully kept her blood pressure at healthy levels.

If you're worried that taking hypertension medications means you'll have to take them forever, that's not necessarily true. "Some people may require a lifetime of medication, but [with their doctor's approval], others can reduce or stop taking it due to changes in lifestyle, diet, weight, etc.," Dr. Pianko assures.

For Moon, that's one of her goals. "Eventually, I would like to get off the medicine," she says. That accomplishment and being able to have normal blood pressure through only lifestyle habits will put her much closer to her ultimate goal: living a long and healthy life. "I'm not trying to die early," she says. "I have to be here for my three children as long as possible." 

Questions to Ask

- How often should I monitor my blood pressure at home?
 - I'm taking [over-the-counter or prescribed medication/supplement/vitamins]. Could it possibly affect my blood pressure?
 - If I miss a dose of medication, should I take it as soon as I remember or skip it until the next scheduled time?
 - Once my blood pressure improves, how will we determine when I can reduce or stop medications?
 - Before you prescribe medication, is it possible for me to try lifestyle changes?
 - Are there foods or drinks I should avoid with this medication?
 - How long will it take before I start to see changes in my blood pressure readings or how I feel?
 - I've been having trouble making [a particular lifestyle change]. Do you have any advice?
 - What symptoms or side effects mean I should call your office immediately? Which ones mean I should go to the ER?
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