High Blood Pressure

What is blood pressure?
Blood pressure measures the pressure of the blood in the arteries. Arteries are groups of tubes that carry blood from your heart to the rest of your body. The arteries can automatically contract (get smaller) or expand (get bigger). When arteries contract, the pressure inside becomes higher. When arteries expand, the pressure inside becomes lower. If arteries remain contracted or become clogged, the disease hypertension or high blood pressure occurs.

How is blood pressure measured?
When your blood pressure is checked, two numbers are recorded. The top number is called the systolic. It is the pressure in the arteries each time the blood is pushed out of the heart. The bottom number is called the diastolic. It is the resting pressure when the heart relaxes between beats. The harder it is for blood to flow through the arteries, the higher the blood pressure numbers will be.

What is high blood pressure?
- Normal blood pressure: systolic less than 120 and diastolic less than 80.
- Elevated blood pressure: systolic 120 to 129 and diastolic less than 80.
- High blood pressure (hypertension) stage 1: systolic 130 to 139 or diastolic 80 to 89.
- High blood pressure (hypertension) stage 2: systolic 140 or higher or diastolic 90 or higher.
- Hypertensive crisis (consult your doctor right away): systolic higher than 180 and/or diastolic higher than 120.

A diagnosis of high blood pressure will not be made until your blood pressure has been checked several times, and it continues to be high. Your doctor will decide what is “high blood pressure” for you. Keeping your blood pressure under good control is very important, especially if you have other medical conditions, such as diabetes, kidney disease or stroke.

Why is high blood pressure bad?
High blood pressure means that the heart is working harder than normal. If high blood pressure is not treated, the heart has to work harder and harder to pump blood to the rest of your body's organs and tissues. This may cause other health problems such as a heart attack, stroke, kidney failure and hardening of the arteries, called atherosclerosis. Many people with high blood pressure do not feel sick. However, this does not mean that you do not need treatment for your high blood pressure.
What can be done?

In most cases, the cause of high blood pressure is unknown. Although there is no cure for high blood pressure, it can be controlled. Lifestyle changes and medicines can lower blood pressure. Your doctor may try one medicine or a combination of medicines to see what works best for you.

If you have high blood pressure:

- Follow your doctor’s advice and make lifestyle changes.
- Ask about getting a blood pressure monitor to use at home to record your blood pressure results between doctor’s visits.
- Talk to your doctor if your medicine is giving you side effects. Do not stop taking the medicine without first talking with your doctor.
- Stay on your medicines, even if you feel fine and your blood pressure returns to normal.

What can you do?

There are many things that you can do to lower your blood pressure. These diet and lifestyles changes include:

- **Lose weight** if you are overweight.
- **Lower your sodium (salt) intake.** Sodium causes your body to hold fluids, which can cause the pressure inside the arteries to be higher. In turn, your heart has to work harder.
- **Develop an exercise program,** with guidance from your doctor. Regular exercise, not only improves your overall physical conditioning, but it also will help with weight loss and lowering of your blood pressure.
- **Avoid drinking alcohol.** Heavy use of alcohol has been associated with high blood pressure.
- **Learn to relax** and take time out to do things you enjoy. Prolonged stress has been linked to high blood pressure.
- **Stop smoking** or cut down on the amount you smoke. Smoking causes your arteries to contract, which increases your blood pressure. Ask your doctor about prescription medicines to help you quit.