High Blood Pressure in African Americans

High blood pressure affects more than 40 percent of African Americans and is often referred to as a “silent killer.” Often people do not go for treatment because there are no signs of disease. Many people with high blood pressure do not feel sick, but they may have damage to their body that could cause major problems later. Blood pressure should be checked regularly to know when it is high. Stroke, heart disease, and kidney failure all can result from high blood pressure.

How blood pressure is measured
Blood pressure is a measure of the pressure of the blood in your arteries. Your arteries are tubes that carry blood from your heart to the rest of your body. When your blood pressure is high, this makes your heart work harder. Over time, high blood pressure can cause you to be more likely to have a heart attack, stroke, or kidney failure.

When your blood pressure is checked, two numbers are recorded. You may hear the nurse or the doctor say, “Your blood pressure is 120 over 80.” The top number is called the systolic pressure. This is the pressure when your heart is pumping. The bottom number is called the diastolic pressure. This is the pressure between beats when your heart is resting. The harder it is for your blood to flow, the higher the blood pressure numbers will be.

Your blood pressure reading
- **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.

If your blood pressure is above normal, talk with your doctor about your risks and treatment options.

Signs of high blood pressure
- Have headaches often
- Feeling tired
- Blurred vision
- Trouble breathing or shortness of breath
Treatment of high blood pressure

Your doctor may order medicine to help control your blood pressure. Take your medicine even if you start to feel better. **Never stop taking your medicine without first talking to your doctor.**

You can also help lower your blood pressure by making a few lifestyle changes, such as:

- Lose weight if you are overweight and reduce fatty or fried foods in your diet.
- Lower your salt intake.
- Exercise every day. Talk with your doctor about an exercise program.
- Stop smoking or other tobacco use.
- Reduce stress.

Controlling high blood pressure is even more important if you are a smoker, or have diabetes, high cholesterol, or a family history of stroke or heart disease. **Have your blood pressure, cholesterol, and overall heart health checked at least once a year.**

For more information on high blood pressure, ask your doctor or nurse.