



February

Member Newsletter

Blood pressure screening is key

If you missed your yearly blood pressure screening due to pandemic-related reasons, you may discover that your reading might have risen. A combination of weight gain, stress, alcohol consumption, and limited activity could be why. Don't wait any longer to check your blood pressure—it's the only way to tell if you have hypertension (high blood pressure), the main risk factor for heart disease, stroke and kidney failure. Here's what you should know:

Get more than one reading. Several factors can affect a high blood pressure reading, including anxiety at doctor visits, plus what you eat, drink, or do beforehand. To get an accurate reading:

- Don't eat or drink anything 30 minutes before you take your blood pressure
- Empty your bladder beforehand
- Sit comfortably for five minutes, and rest your arm with the cuff (placed on bare skin as opposed to clothing, if possible) at chest height
- Don't talk while your blood pressure is being measured



Get your blood pressure checked.
It can be lifesaving!

Understand your numbers. Blood pressure is measured with two numbers. The top number (systolic pressure) measures the pressure when your heart beats. The bottom number (diastolic pressure) measures the pressure in your arteries when your heart rests between beats. A normal blood pressure is less than 120/80 mmHg (both numbers). Greater than 130/80 repeatedly is hypertension, based on the guidelines for the normal range. <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/high-blood-pressure/the-facts-about-high-blood-pressure/what-is-high-blood-pressure>

Numbers staying high? Talk to your doctor about a plan to manage hypertension. Monitoring and healthy lifestyle measures are key. Depending on your readings and factors such as additional conditions and certain symptoms, you may need medication. Learn more at: <https://www.cdc.gov/bloodpressure/manage.htm>

Inhale calm, exhale stress

An unexpected bill arrives, you're stuck in traffic, or you're behind at work. Whenever you're stressed, your body is likely to respond with shallow breathing. You feel anxious and overwhelmed. Fortunately, performing simple, deep "belly breathing" exercises can help trigger a healthy relaxation response to stress, helping you feel calmer and more in control. Here's what you should know about belly breathing:

It helps you get oxygen deeply into your lungs. By breathing through your belly, pushing your abdomen out fully as you inhale slowly, and then exhaling slowly, fully compressing your belly, you are using your diaphragm rather than your chest to breathe. This helps you breathe more fully into your lungs, calming your nervous system. Studies by the National Institutes of Health have shown that "diaphragmatic breathing" exercises may also help lower blood pressure and reduce levels of cortisol (a main stress hormone in the body).

Visualizing a focal point can be a helpful tool. "Box breathing" or "square breathing" is a simple tool that can help focus your mind on deep breathing; it can be performed before, during, and/or after stressful experiences. You do it by visualizing a box or square with four equal sides. It works like this:

Step One: Breathe in slowly through the nose for a count of 4, fully expanding your abdomen.

Step Two: Hold breath for a count of 4.

Step Three: Exhale slowly for a count of 4, fully compressing your abdomen.

Step Four: Hold breath for a count of 4.

Repeat the sequence. To learn more, visit:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK513238/>



It works best by making it a habit. While you can perform belly breathing in the moment—at your desk, waiting in line, etc.—experts suggest establishing the habit of shifting from focusing on stressors to focusing on calm in the following way: Choose a special place where you can sit or lie down comfortably, and practice deep breathing 1-2 times daily at the same time, preferably for about 10 to 20 minutes.

Combining deep breathing with other techniques enhances the relaxation response. Try deep breathing while performing progressive muscle relaxation (tensing, then releasing each muscle group from feet to neck), doing mindfulness meditation, etc.

To learn more:

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/relaxation-techniques-breath-control-helps-quell-errant-stress-response>

Struggling with ongoing anxiety and feeling overwhelmed? Talk to your doctor about a referral to a qualified counselor or contact a qualified counselor yourself for support and guidance.

Quick tips for a healthy heart

February is American Heart Month, an important time to think about your heart's health and learn more about how to get, and stay, heart-healthy. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about half of the U.S. population has at least one key risk factor for heart disease, including obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and smoking. Despite this alarming statistic, there are a number of steps you can take to reduce your risk and improve your heart health. Here are some quick tips to keep your most vital organ healthy.



- **See your doctor for a check-up** to help identify any conditions that could potentially lead to heart issues, and be sure to discuss your family history. By identifying potential issues early, it is possible to manage them effectively and avoid more complicated problems later on.
- **Strive for a healthy weight.** Be sure to include a regular exercise routine combined with good nutritional habits to help achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- **Be physically active every day.** Adopt the motto “move more, sit less.”
- **Choose nutrient-rich foods.** Eat more fiber-rich foods, whole grains, fruits, veggies, and lean proteins. Eat fewer fatty, salty, sugary foods and red meat. Limit alcohol, too!
- **Control your medical conditions.** If you have high blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes, follow your doctor's instructions for adhering to regular check-ups and taking any medications.
- **Address your stress with relaxing activities.** Long-term stress bumps up your heart rate and blood pressure, which can damage artery walls.
- **If you vape or use tobacco products, quit—and avoid secondhand smoke, too!** Nonsmokers are up to 30 percent more likely to develop heart disease from secondhand smoke exposure at home or work.
- **Don't ignore snoring**—it could be a sign of sleep apnea. If not properly treated, sleep apnea can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

For more help, talk to Health Advocate, your health practitioner or a licensed counselor.

Navigating the Details After a Loved One's Death

Visit [HealthAdvocate.com/members](https://www.healthadvocate.com/members) to log onto your member website and access the EAP+Work/Life homepage. [Click on Webinar.](#)

American Heart Month

This year, the CDC is shining a light on hypertension, which is defined as consistently high blood pressure (above 130 mmHG systolic or 80 mmHG diastolic). It is the leading risk factor for heart disease, the primary cause of death in the United States. While nearly half of adults in the U.S. have hypertension, only 1 in 4 adults have their high blood pressure under control. Getting your blood pressure checked is the only way to tell if it's high. Then you can start taking the correct measures to control it—protecting your health, and even saving your life! For more information, go to:

<https://www.cdc.gov/bloodpressure/facts.htm>

<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/high-blood-pressure>