

What are the signs of high blood pressure?

High blood pressure is called "the silent killer" because it does not have any signs or symptoms. Many people have high blood pressure for years without knowing it. Having your blood pressure measured is the only way to tell if you have high blood pressure. You should have your blood pressure measured at least once every 2 years, and at least once a year if you already have prehypertension. Based on your specific risk factors, your doctor may recommend that you have your blood pressure checked more often.

How common is high blood pressure, and who is at risk?

One in 3 American adults has high blood pressure. This includes 36 million women: 32% of white women, 47% of African-American women, and 31% of Mexican-American women.⁵ Another 37% of all adults have prehypertension; 40% of all adults with prehypertension are women.

Many factors affect your risk of developing high blood pressure. Blood pressure tends to increase with age, making you more likely to get high blood pressure as you get older. In people younger than 55 years, more men than women have high blood pressure. After age 55, more women than men have high blood pressure.

Your risk of developing high blood pressure also increases if you:

- Are [overweight or obese](#)
- Don't get much [exercise](#)
- Have an unhealthy [diet](#)
- Have a family history of high blood pressure
- Are African American
- Have [diabetes](#)
- Have [high cholesterol](#)
- Drink too much alcohol

What causes high blood pressure?

Although there are many factors that increase your chance of developing high blood pressure, in most people the basic causes of high blood pressure are unknown. Less than 10% of high blood pressure cases are caused by another medical problem, such as kidney disease. This type of high blood pressure is called *secondary hypertension*. It is usually temporary and goes away when the original medical problem is corrected.

Can hormone therapy and birth control affect blood pressure in women?

While it is unusual, your blood pressure may go up if you are taking [birth control pills](#) or [hormone therapy](#) (HT) for menopausal symptoms, so it is important to have your blood pressure checked regularly. Women who take birth control pills are 2 to 3 times more likely to develop high blood pressure; this risk increases with age and obesity.

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Why are African Americans more likely to develop high blood pressure?

African Americans tend to develop high blood pressure at an earlier age than people of other races.² High blood pressure in African Americans is also more severe and results in more complications. Both genetics and social factors are probably responsible. The prevalence and severity of high blood pressure in African Americans is a major reason for an increased stroke risk (see also: [Race/Ethnicity](#) as a risk factor for stroke).

One theory is that, to survive in a hot climate, Africans developed the ability to sweat a lot to cool down. When the body sweats, you lose not only water, but salt as well: to make up for the lost salt, Africans have a strong taste for salt and their kidneys retain more salt than other races. While these adaptations enabled Africans to survive in a hot climate where salt was scarce, in people of African descent who have access to a high-salt Western diet, they result in high blood pressure.⁷

In addition, African-American women are at a higher risk than women of other races for developing high blood pressure due to overweight and obesity and lack of exercise. African Americans who are economically disadvantaged are also less likely to have health insurance or get frequent checkups, allowing high blood pressure to develop unchecked and causing more complications. When African Americans with high blood pressure receive similar care to white patients, the race gap in complications is reduced or disappears.⁸

African Americans may also respond differently than other races to [blood pressure medications](#) such as ACE inhibitors and ARBs. When used alone, these medications are less effective at lowering blood pressure in African Americans than in other races. However, when these medications are combined with a diuretic, they are just as effective in African Americans as in other races.

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