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How Is Blood Pressure Checked?

Having your blood pressure checked is quick, easy, and painless. Your blood pressure is measured with an instrument called a sphygmomanometer (sfig-mo-ma-nom-e-ter).

It works like this: A blood pressure cuff is wrapped around your upper arm and inflated to stop the blood flow in your artery for a few seconds. A valve is opened and air is then released from the cuff and the sounds of your blood rushing through an artery are heard through a stethoscope. The first sound heard and registered on the gauge or mercury column is called the systolic blood pressure. It represents the maximum pressure in the artery produced as the heart contracts and the blood begins to flow. The last sound heard as more air is released from the cuff is the diastolic blood pressure. It represents the lowest pressure that remains within the artery when the heart is at rest.

What Do the Numbers Mean?

Blood pressure is always expressed in two numbers that represent the systolic and diastolic pressures. These numbers are measurements of millimeters (mm) of mercury (Hg). The measurement is written one above or before the other, with the systolic number on the top and the diastolic number on the bottom. For example, a blood pressure measurement of 120/80 mm Hg is expressed verbally as "120 over 80." See the table below which shows categories for blood pressure levels in adults.

If your blood pressure is less than 140/90 mm Hg, it is considered normal. However, a blood pressure below 120/80 mm Hg is even better for your heart and blood vessels. People use to think that low blood pressure (for example, 105/65 mm Hg in an adult) was unhealthy. Except for rare cases, this is not true. High blood pressure or "hypertension" is classified by stages and is more serious as the numbers get higher.

CATEGORIES FOR BLOOD PRESSURE LEVELS IN ADULTS*

(Age 18 Years and Older)

Blood Pressure Level (mm Hg)

Category	Systolic	Diastolic
Normal	<130	<85
High Normal	130-139	85-89
High Blood Pressure		
Stage 1	140-159	90-99
Stage 2	160-179	100-109
Stage 3	>180	>110

*For those not taking medicine for high blood pressure and not having a short term serious illness. These categories are from the National High Blood Pressure Education Program.

(< means less than > means greater than or equal to)