

Many people have high blood pressure for years without knowing it. Uncontrolled high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart attack, heart failure or kidney failure. The only way to tell if you have high blood pressure is to have your blood pressure checked. According to recent estimates, one in four U.S. adults has high blood pressure, but because there are no symptoms, nearly one-third of these people don't know they have it. This is why high blood pressure is often called the "silent killer."

Blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of your arteries. Your heart creates this force as it pumps blood to all parts of your body. Normal blood pressure is below 120/80 mm Hg. If you're an adult and your blood pressure is 140/90 mm Hg or higher, you have high blood pressure.

High blood pressure adds to the workload of your heart and arteries. Your heart must pump with more force, and the arteries must carry blood that's moving under greater pressure. If high blood pressure continues for a long time, your heart and arteries may not function as well as they should. Other body organs also may be affected.

Your heart, brain and kidneys can handle increased pressure for a long time. That's why you can live for years without any symptoms or ill effects. But that doesn't mean it's not hurting you. High blood pressure is a key risk factor for a stroke, heart attack and kidney failure.

High blood pressure can occur in children or adults, but it's more common among people over age 35. It's particularly prevalent in African-Americans, middle-aged and elderly people, obese people, heavy drinkers and women who are taking birth control pills. It may run in families, but many people with a strong family history of high blood pressure never have it. People with diabetes mellitus, gout or kidney disease are more likely to have high blood pressure, too.

What can you do about high blood pressure?

If you have high blood pressure, you can do a lot to reduce it. First, work with your doctor to determine the best treatment for you. It may include a low-fat and low-salt diet. You may be advised to lose weight and become more physically active. You also could be told to reduce your alcohol intake.

Many medicines also can help reduce and control high blood pressure. Your doctor will decide whether you need drug treatment in addition to dietary and lifestyle changes.