

High Blood Pressure in Children



Blood pressure is a measure of how hard the blood pushes against the walls of the arteries as it moves through the body. High blood pressure happens when the blood is pushing too hard. Another name for high blood pressure is hypertension.

Blood pressure readings include two numbers. For example, a child's reading might be 96/57 or "96 over 57." The first number is the systolic pressure. This shows how hard the blood pushes when the heart is pumping. The second number is the diastolic pressure. This shows how hard the blood pushes between heartbeats, when the heart is relaxed and filling with blood.

What is normal and what is high blood pressure depends on your child's age, sex, and height. The numbers will change as your child gets older and grows.

High blood pressure does not have symptoms, but it needs to be treated. If blood pressure is very high, it can cause serious damage to a child's body, especially the heart and brain. But these serious problems can be prevented by lowering the high blood pressure.

What causes high blood pressure?

In some cases, doctors cannot say exactly what causes high blood pressure. But several things make a child more likely to develop high blood pressure. These include having a family history of high blood pressure and being overweight.

High blood pressure also can be caused by other health problems, such as sleep apnea or heart or kidney problems. It also can be caused by medicine the child is taking.

Which tests are needed?

Children ages 3 and over should have their blood pressure checked regularly during routine well-child visits and checkups. If your child has a reading of high blood pressure, your doctor will want to do a few more readings. Your doctor might ask you and your child to come back in a week or two for these readings.

Your child might also have to wear a portable device to measure blood pressure over 24 hours. This is called ambulatory blood pressure monitoring.

Having high blood pressure can make heart disease more likely. Your doctor may check your child for risk factors for heart disease, such as high cholesterol or diabetes. A risk factor is something that makes a disease more likely.

How is high blood pressure in children treated?

High blood pressure can be treated with lifestyle changes and medicine. If another health problem is causing the high blood pressure, treating the problem usually lowers the blood pressure.

Lifestyle changes

Lifestyle changes are usually tried first.

- Help your child lose weight, if your child is overweight. Eating healthy foods and being physically active are the best ways to do this. Avoid putting your child on a weight-loss diet.
- See that your child is active. Help your child get at least 1 hour of physical activity every day.
- Limit how much your child watches TV and plays video or computer games. Set a goal of seeing that your child does these activities for no more than 2 hours a day.
- Encourage your child to eat more fresh fruit and vegetables, fiber, and nonfat dairy products. Help your child eat fewer high-sugar and high-sodium foods and drinks.
- Work on lifestyle changes together as a family. For example, try to eat as a family at regular times, including breakfast, and find an activity you all can do.

If your child doesn't have high blood pressure but is likely to develop it, these changes can also be used to help prevent high blood pressure. If your child is likely to develop high blood pressure, you may be able to prevent it by being sure that your child eats a healthy diet, is active, and stays at a healthy weight.

Medicine

Medicines are used to treat high blood pressure when lifestyle changes do not work or if blood pressure is very high. Some children may be able to stop taking the medicine after their blood

pressure comes down, especially if they are overweight and lose weight. Your doctor can tell you how long your child may need medicines.

It can be hard to remember to have your child take pills when he or she has no symptoms. But blood pressure will go back up if your child does not take the medicine. Make your child's pill schedule as simple as you can. Plan times for your child to take the medicine when he or she is doing other things, like eating a meal or getting ready for bed.

Medicines for high blood pressure can have side effects. Ask your doctor what side effects to look for and what to do if you see them.

Questions to ask your doctor

Use the space below to list your questions or concerns. Take this sheet with you to your next doctor visit.

Questions about high blood pressure: