

Five common myths about high blood pressure

High blood pressure – also known as hypertension – can be very damaging to the heart, the brain – and all organs. In fact, without regular blood pressure check-ups, Canadians can put themselves at risk of serious health problems and not even know it. But by being informed and taking action, you can help get high blood pressure under control before it becomes a problem.



Why high blood pressure is risky

Your heart pumps blood around your body using a certain amount of pressure. But when the pressure becomes too high, it starts to damage artery walls. This scarring promotes the build-up of fatty plaque, which can narrow and eventually block arteries. It can also strain and weaken the body's organs, doubling or even tripling the risk of heart disease and stroke and increasing the risk of kidney disease. Very high blood pressure can cause blood vessels in the brain to burst or dislodge plaque that causes the body to form a clot, which could break off and move up into the brain, resulting in a stroke.

A healthy blood pressure reading is **below** 120/80 mm Hg. Blood pressure that is consistently more than 140/90 mm Hg is considered high, but if you have diabetes, anything above 130/80 mm Hg is high.

Myth 1: If my blood pressure were high, I would be able to feel it.

High blood pressure is often referred to as the “silent killer” because there are usually no symptoms. Some people may think that if their heart rate (number of times your heart beats per minute) is normal, this means their blood pressure is, too. But how fast your heart beats is not necessarily an indication of how high your blood pressure is. The only way to find out if you have high blood pressure is to get your blood pressure checked by your doctor or other qualified healthcare provider. Know your blood pressure readings and find out how often you should have it checked.

Myth 2: One abnormal pressure reading at the doctor means I have high blood pressure.

One high reading is not enough to determine that you have high blood pressure. A doctor will diagnose hypertension only after several readings taken over a period of time. If you have one high reading, you should have it measured at least two more times on separate days to check whether it is consistently high. Your doctor may advise you to abstain from caffeine or physical activity several hours before the test to get an accurate reading.

Myth 3: High blood pressure is always caused by a poor diet and lack of activity.

There are some diet and lifestyle factors that can certainly increase your risk of high blood pressure. Some of the major factors include eating too much salt, a lack of regular physical activity or being overweight or obese. However, some of the risk factors for high blood pressure are things that you cannot control such as:

- Age (about half of people over the age of 65 have high blood pressure)
- Family history of high blood pressure
- Ethnicity (high blood pressure is more common among people who are of African, South Asian or First Nations, Inuit or Métis heritage.)

If you belong to an at-risk group, talk to your doctor about your blood pressure as soon as possible. Make sure you are getting regular blood pressure checks and listening to your doctor's advice on the best preventive measures.

Myth 4: The only way to control high blood pressure is with medication.

If you've been diagnosed with high blood pressure, medication is extremely important to keep it under control. But, along with medication, there are also lifestyle habits such as eating healthy foods and getting regular physical activity that can keep your blood pressure in a healthy range. Start by getting a personalized Blood Pressure Action Plan™ at www.heartandstroke.ca/bp

Myth 5: My blood pressure is high only because I drink so much coffee.

Caffeine's effect on the body, and particularly blood pressure, is still widely debated. Studies have shown that for people who don't have caffeine on a regular basis, drinking coffee, tea, some soft drinks, chocolate and headache remedies may cause blood pressure to go up – but only temporarily. Researchers have noted a significant increase in blood pressure of 2.4 mm Hg systolic and 1.2 mm Hg diastolic for people drinking an average of five cups of coffee a day.

As well, the body does seem to become tolerant to the effects of caffeine when it is consumed regularly, so the long-term effects on blood pressure are not well-understood. When having your blood pressure taken, you may want to avoid coffee for several hours before in order to get an accurate reading. Talk to your doctor before consuming any caffeine products, including coffee. Caffeine may also aggravate other heart conditions like arrhythmia.

Reprinted with permission by the Heart and Stroke Foundation. To receive exclusive, heart-healthy tips every month, you may wish to sign up for He@lthline, the Foundation's free e-newsletter at www.heartandstroke.ca/subscribe