



# Patient education: High blood pressure emergencies (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

Please read the [Disclaimer](#) at the end of this page.

---

## What is a high blood pressure emergency?

This is a serious condition that can happen when a person's blood pressure gets much higher than normal. When this happens, it can lead to problems in 1 or more of the following organs:

- Eyes – Problems can include bleeding in the back of the eye, or swelling of the nerve that runs from the eye to the brain.
- Brain – Problems can include swelling or bleeding in the brain, or a stroke. A stroke is when a part of the brain is damaged because of a problem with blood flow.
- Kidneys – Very high blood pressure can lead to kidney failure, which is when the kidneys stop working.
- Heart – Heart problems can include a heart attack, heart failure, or damage to a major blood vessel.

Without treatment right away, these problems can lead to death.

When your doctor or nurse tells you your blood pressure, they say 2 numbers. For example, your doctor might say your blood pressure is "140 over 90." When people have a high blood pressure emergency, their blood pressure is usually **"180 over 120" or higher**.

Other terms doctors might use for a high blood pressure emergency are "hypertensive emergency" or "malignant hypertension."

Sometimes, a person's blood pressure is much higher than normal, but it hasn't damaged any organs. This is called "hypertensive urgency." It is not usually treated the same as a high blood pressure emergency.

---

## What are the symptoms of a high blood pressure emergency?

The symptoms depend on the organ or organs affected. They can include:

- Blurry vision or other vision changes
- Headache
- Nausea or vomiting
- Confusion
- Passing out or seizures – Seizures are waves of abnormal electrical activity in the brain that can make people move or behave strangely.
- Weakness or numbness on 1 side of the body, or in 1 arm or leg
- Difficulty talking
- Trouble breathing
- Chest pain
- Pain in the upper back or between the shoulders
- Brown or bloody urine
- Pain in the lower back or 1 the side of the body

---

## Will I need tests?

Yes. Your doctor or nurse will ask about your symptoms, do an exam, and check your blood pressure. They might use a special light to look in the back of your eyes.

Your doctor will also do tests to check how serious your condition is. Tests can include:

- Blood tests
- Urine tests
- Chest X-ray
- CT scan or other imaging test of your brain – These create pictures of the inside of the body.
- CT scan or other imaging test of your chest
- Electrocardiogram ("ECG") – This measures the electrical activity in your heart ( [figure 1](#)).

## How is a high blood pressure emergency treated?

It is treated in the hospital. Your doctor will give you medicines to lower your blood pressure quickly. These are usually given through a thin tube that goes into your vein, called an "IV."

Your doctor will also treat any problems caused by your very high blood pressure, if possible.

People who have a high blood pressure emergency usually need long-term treatment to keep their blood pressure under control. This usually includes:

- Taking medicines
- Following a low-salt ("low-sodium") diet that includes a lot of fruits and vegetables
- Losing weight (if have excess body weight)
- Getting regular exercise

---

## When should I call the doctor?

Call your doctor or nurse right away if you have the symptoms listed above, especially if you know you have high blood pressure.

Some people check their blood pressure at home using a home blood pressure meter. If you do this, call your doctor if you have 2 or more readings higher than 180 over 120. You should call even if you don't have any other symptoms.

---

## More on this topic

[Patient education: High blood pressure in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Blood pressure measurement \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Checking your blood pressure at home \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Medicines for high blood pressure \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: High blood pressure and pregnancy \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Understanding your risk of high blood pressure \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Controlling your blood pressure through lifestyle \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Low-sodium diet \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: DASH diet \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: High blood pressure in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: High blood pressure treatment in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: High blood pressure, diet, and weight \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Low-sodium diet \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

All topics are updated as new evidence becomes available and our [peer review process](#) is complete.

**This topic retrieved from UpToDate on:** Dec 23, 2024.

Disclaimer: This generalized information is a limited summary of diagnosis, treatment, and/or medication information. It is not meant to be comprehensive and should be used as a tool to help the user understand and/or assess potential diagnostic and treatment options. It does NOT include all information about conditions, treatments, medications, side effects, or risks that may apply to a specific patient. It is not intended to be medical advice or a substitute for the medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment of a health care provider based on the health care provider's examination and assessment of a patient's specific and unique circumstances. Patients must speak with a health care provider for complete information about their health, medical questions, and treatment options, including any risks or benefits regarding use of medications. This information does not endorse any treatments or medications as safe, effective, or approved for treating a specific patient. UpToDate, Inc. and its affiliates disclaim any warranty or liability relating to this information or the use thereof. The use of this information is governed by the Terms of Use, available at <https://www.wolterskluwer.com/en/know/clinical-effectiveness-terms>. 2024© UpToDate, Inc. and its affiliates and/or licensors. All rights reserved.

Topic 17188 Version 13.0

→