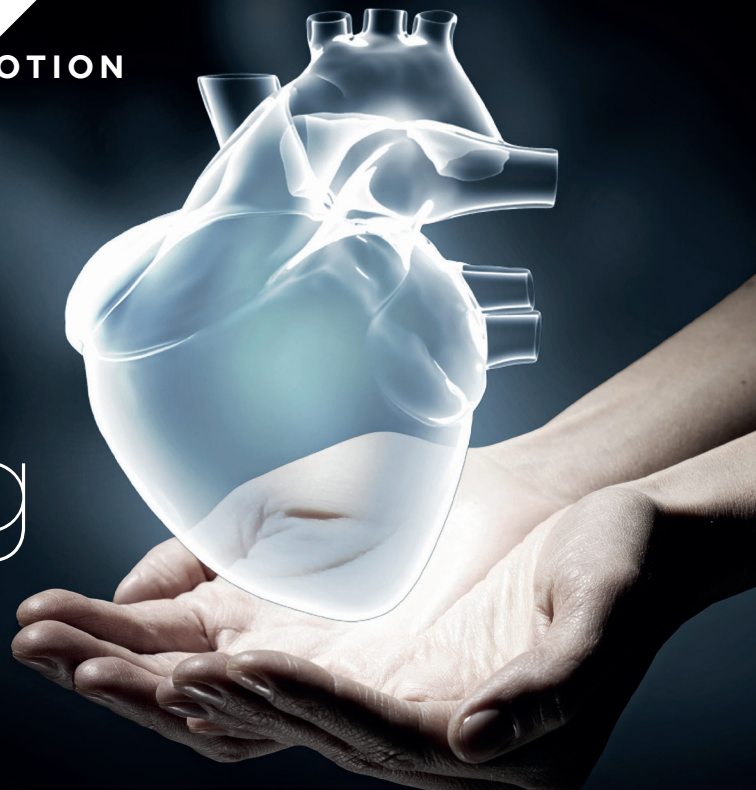


Pressure is building



Hypertension can lead to major health problems, such as stroke and heart attack. But there's a lot you can do to reduce the risks – starting with lifestyle changes

Put simply, blood pressure (BP) refers to the pressure of blood in your body. A certain amount of pressure is needed for the blood to move through the body, but if it is too high it can cause problems.

This is known as high blood pressure, or hypertension. BP readings consist of an upper and lower number.

The upper number is when the heart contracts and pushes blood out, which is called systolic pressure.

The lower number records diastolic pressure, which is when it relaxes. The BP reading is measured in millimetres of mercury, or mmHg.

For example, a blood pressure reading is written as 130/80mmHg, or '130 over 80'. The systolic pressure is 130 and the diastolic pressure is 80.

The average normal BP should be lower than 140/90 mmHg. In most people, systolic BP rises with age due to increasing stiffness of large arteries,

long-term build-up of plaque and increased cardiac and vascular disease.

Is high BP a big problem?

In the UK, 15 million people have high BP – and 50% of cases are undiagnosed, according to the British Heart Foundation. It's a huge problem.

High BP doesn't usually have any symptoms – it is picked up when a person has a heart attack, stroke or kidney failure. High BP is a cause of almost half the strokes and heart attacks in the UK.

How is it diagnosed?

The best way is to get it checked. If your BP reading is higher than normal, your doctor may take several readings over time before diagnosing you with high BP.

A single high reading does not mean you have high BP, but if your readings are persistently above 140/90mmHg your doctor may recommend lifestyle changes and discuss treatment options.

Even if your BP is normal, you should consider making lifestyle modifications to prevent the development of high BP.

Who is at risk?

You have a higher chance of developing high BP if you are overweight, a smoker, regularly drink a lot of alcohol, don't take enough exercise, are under stress or have a family history of high BP.

Which health problems are caused by high BP?

HEART DISEASE Heart failure (when it cannot pump blood around the body properly), attacks and enlarged hearts.

PLAQUE DISEASE A build-up of fatty materials on the inside of the arteries.

KIDNEY DISEASE High BP can damage vessels and filters in the kidneys, so they cease to expel waste effectively.

STROKE It is a major cause of stroke and resulting brain damage.

EYES High BP can damage the blood vessels in the retina.

Can I prevent it?

Yes – maintaining an ideal weight, cutting your salt intake, being active, reducing stress and eating plenty of fruit and vegetables can all help.

What tests do I need?

If your BP is raised, you would benefit from tests to check cholesterol and blood sugar levels, a electrocardiogram to track your heartbeat, and urine tests.

What can I do to manage my BP?

Try lifestyle changes first. If these are not enough, get the right medication. As high BP doesn't usually have symptoms, it is easy to forget to take your tablets – but act now to treat high BP before it causes a major problem.

MEET THE EXPERT



Dr Naveen Mudalagiri, MBBS, MRCP, MD BSc, PgCERT, HBE FHEA, is a consultant cardiologist

As a specialist in the diagnosis

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