

UW Health: “Knowing your numbers” is key to preventing and managing high blood pressure

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MADISON, Wis. – The pandemic has negatively impacted our physical and psychological health in a variety of ways, but a recent [study](#) says it has also contributed to the increase in blood pressure among Americans.

Normal blood pressure is less than 120/80 mm Hg (millimeters of mercury). The study, which was published in the journal *Circulation*, found that the average top number in the blood pressure reading increased by about 2 mm Hg and the bottom number also rose slightly between April 2020 to December 2020.

That increase, though small, is still consequential for many thousands of Americans who were on the verge of having high blood pressure (aka hypertension) and the millions of Americans who were already living with it.

Hypertension is a common yet serious disease, and patients who are unable to manage their high blood pressure are at risk for stroke, heart attack, heart failure and kidney failure. According to Dr. Karen Moncher, cardiologist, UW Health Advanced Hypertension Clinic, and clinical professor, UW School of Medicine and Public Health, knowing and understanding your blood pressure numbers can go a long way toward managing that risk.

“Hypertension is the single most significant and modifiable risk factor for cardiovascular disease worldwide,” said Moncher. “Knowing your blood pressure numbers, along with your family’s history of disease, are the first steps toward understanding your risk and taking the actions necessary to improve your heart health.”

Blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of arteries. It is recorded as two numbers. The systolic pressure is the top number (e.g., 120 mm Hg). It occurs as the heart squeezes. The diastolic pressure is the bottom number (e.g., 80 mm Hg). It occurs as the heart rests between beats. This is written as 120/80 or said as 120 over 80. According to the latest guidelines, a person's blood pressure readings will fall into one of the following four categories:

- **Normal** — less than 120/80 mm Hg.
- **Elevated** — Ranging from 120-129 systolic and less than 80 mm Hg diastolic.
- **Hypertension stage 1** — Ranging from 130-139 systolic or 80-89 mm Hg diastolic.
- **Hypertension stage 2** — Ranging at 140/90 mm Hg or higher.

UW Health recommends annual blood pressure screening for adults age 40 and older, and for all adults with an increased risk for high blood pressure. Patients who are age 18-39 years with normal blood pressure and no other cardiovascular disease risk factors should be screened every 3-5 years.

Moncher says there are steps we can all take to either lower our blood pressure or prevent the development of high blood pressure:

- Limit foods that are high in salt (sodium)
- Limit alcohol intake
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Stay active with regular exercise and physical activity
- Quit smoking

If these lifestyle changes aren't enough, medications are available that can help manage blood pressure. Moncher says most cases of hypertension can be managed by a person's primary care doctor, but some people find they need additional help and can be referred to specialty clinics, like the UW Health Advanced Hypertension Clinic. This clinic is the only hypertension center of excellence in Wisconsin to be certified by the American Heart Association and one of only about 20 nationwide. It is especially helpful for patients with difficult-to-treat hypertension.

Hypertension now affects over 40% of the U.S. adult population and is the most common diagnosis at outpatient office visits. From 2005 to 2015, the death rates attributable to high blood pressure increased 10.5%, and the actual number of deaths attributable to high blood pressure rose 37.5%. In 2015, it was the primary

or contributing cause of death for more than 427,000 Americans.

Moncher is available for interviews on this topic.