

## Pregnancy: High Blood Pressure



Blood pressure is a measure of how hard the blood pushes against the walls of your arteries as it moves through your body. It is normal for blood pressure to go up and down throughout the day, but if it stays up, you have high blood pressure. Another name for high blood pressure is hypertension.

You may have had high blood pressure before you were pregnant, or your blood pressure may have started to go up during your pregnancy. Mild high blood pressure while you are pregnant is usually not dangerous, but you need to watch it closely. If you are pregnant and have high blood pressure, you are more likely to have preeclampsia or placental abruption.

Preeclampsia is a problem with blood pressure and other organs. It can reduce oxygen to your baby, which can cause a low birth weight. It also can damage your liver or kidneys. Preeclampsia can become eclampsia, which causes seizures.

Placental abruption occurs when the placenta separates from the uterus before childbirth. This means the growing baby does not get as much oxygen and nutrients. It can be life-threatening for you and your baby.

If you have high blood pressure, you will need to check your blood pressure often until after your baby is born. If your blood pressure goes up suddenly or is very high, your doctor may prescribe medicines. These medicines usually are able to control blood pressure levels.

If at any time during your pregnancy high blood pressure affects your health or your baby's health, your doctor may deliver your baby early. Blood pressure levels usually improve after birth, but women still can have problems for some time after delivery.

### What should you do at home?

#### Control your blood pressure

- Take and record your blood pressure at home if your doctor tells you to. Ask your doctor to check your monitor and be sure you are using it right.
  - Do not eat before taking your blood pressure.
  - Avoid taking your blood pressure if you have just exercised or are nervous or upset. Rest at least 15 minutes before taking your blood pressure.
- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with any medicine.
- Do not use tobacco products or medicines known to raise blood pressure, such as some nasal decongestant sprays.

#### Lead a healthy lifestyle

- Do not smoke. Quitting smoking will help lower your blood pressure and improve your baby's growth and health. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor about stop-smoking programs and medicines. These can increase your chances of quitting for good.

- Eat a balanced and healthy diet that has lots of fruits and vegetables.
- Do not gain too much weight during your pregnancy. Talk to your doctor about how much weight gain is healthy.
- Try not to use salt.
- Get regular, mild exercise during pregnancy. Walking or swimming several times a week can be healthy for you and your baby.
- Reduce stress. Find time to relax, especially if you continue to work, have small children at home, or have a hectic schedule.

### When should you call for help?

**Call 911** anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You passed out (lost consciousness).
- You have severe vaginal bleeding.
- You have severe pain in your belly or pelvis.
- You have had fluid gushing or leaking from your vagina **and** you know or think the umbilical cord is bulging into your vagina. If this happens, immediately get down on your knees so your rear end (buttocks) is higher than your head. This will decrease the pressure on the cord until help arrives.
- You have a seizure.
- You have a severe headache.

**Call your doctor now** or seek medical care right away if:

- You have signs of preeclampsia, such as:
  - Sudden swelling of your face, hands, or feet.
  - New vision problems (such as dimness or blurring).
  - A severe headache.
  - Rapid weight gain.
- You have any vaginal bleeding.
- You have belly pain or cramping.
- You have a fever.
- You have had regular contractions (with or without pain) for an hour. This means that you have 8 or more within 1 hour or 4 or more in 20 minutes after changing your position and drinking fluids.
- You have a sudden release of fluid from your vagina.
- You have low back pain or pelvic pressure that does not go away.
- You notice that your baby has stopped moving or is moving much less than normal.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if you have any problems.