Low Blood Pressure - Factsheet

What is Blood Pressure?

Blood pressure is the pressure of the blood in the arteries as the heart pumps it around the body. It is recorded as two numbers, e.g. 120 over 80 (120/80). The higher number is called the systolic blood pressure and it is a measure of the pressure in the arteries as the heart contracts. The lower number is called the diastolic blood pressure and it is a measure of the pressure in the arteries when the heart is in between contractions. Blood pressure is measured in millimetres of mercury (mmHg).

Your blood pressure changes throughout the day, varying to accommodate the different needs of your body. It is affected by various factors such as body position, emotional state, exercise and sleep.

It is important to have your blood pressure checked regularly because consistently high blood pressure increases the risk of developing heart disease, stroke and organ damage. And since it is not uncommon to have high blood pressure without showing any signs or symptoms of it, you could have high blood pressure and not know it.

Several factors known to contribute to high blood pressure include: obesity, physical inactivity, high fat diet, high salt intake, excessive alcohol, age (>35yrs), family history, stress, being male.

While having high blood pressure is much more of a health risk than having low blood pressure, low blood pressure may also be a cause for concern, depending on the reason(s) for it being low.

Low Blood Pressure/Hypotension

Low blood pressure or hypotension means that the pressure of the blood circulating around the body is lower than normal or lower than expected given the environmental conditions. However, “low” and “hypotension” are relative terms and what may be low or too low for one person may not be low or too low for another person.

Generally speaking, low blood pressure or hypotension is when your blood pressure is measured as being less than 30mmHg below what is normal blood pressure for you. For most people, this means having a blood pressure measurement of 100/60 or lower, on more than one occasion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Systolic</th>
<th>Diastolic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>&lt;100</td>
<td>&lt;60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>&lt;120</td>
<td>&lt;80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Normal</td>
<td>120-139</td>
<td>80-89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild Hypertension*</td>
<td>140-159</td>
<td>90-99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Hypertension*</td>
<td>160-179</td>
<td>100-109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe Hypertension*</td>
<td>&gt;180</td>
<td>&gt;110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*As blood pressure is characterised by large variations, the diagnosis of hypertension should be based on multiple measurements taken on several different occasions.
Symptoms of Low Blood Pressure

Symptoms of low blood pressure may include:
- Light headedness
- Feeling unsteady
- Dizziness
- Feeling weak
- Blurred vision
- Fatigue
- Fainting

Causes of Low Blood Pressure

Low blood pressure is only a problem if it is caused by an underlying health condition which needs to be addressed or if low blood pressure has a negative impact on the body – e.g., starving bodily organs of oxygen or nutrients.

There are many different causes of low blood pressure. These include:
- Emotional stress, fear or pain
- Dehydration
- Blood loss (e.g., from donating blood, a cut etc) or internal bleeding
- Pregnancy
- Diuretics
- Some medications
- Some infections
- Some forms of heart disease
- Some diseases (e.g., Addison’s)

One particular type of low blood pressure or hypotension is orthostatic hypotension. This is the type of low blood pressure or hypotension that may be experienced when you move from a lying or sitting position to standing up, particularly if this movement is done quickly. Normally, when you stand up the blood vessels in your body respond by constricting and increasing blood pressure. With orthostatic low blood pressure or orthostatic hypotension the blood vessels don’t adjust for the change in position to standing, and instead your blood pressure drops with gravity and light headedness or feeling faint can occur.

Causes of orthostatic hypotension include:
- Dehydration
- Prolonged bed rest
- Irregular heart beat (heart arrhythmia)
- Some nervous system diseases.

Managing Low Blood Pressure

Low blood pressure may or may not require treatment depending on the cause(s). If you regularly have symptoms of low blood pressure it is important to see your doctor. Depending on the cause(s) your doctor may recommend lifestyle changes, non-medical management and/or medication.