

# High blood pressure in pregnancy



A blood pressure reading monitors the blood in the arteries. The top number in the reading is the systolic pressure. That's the pressure when the heart muscle contracts. The bottom number is the diastolic pressure. That's the pressure when the heart muscle relaxes.



An example of a blood pressure reading is 120/80. A blood pressure reading should be taken before pregnancy or at its start. This is called a baseline blood pressure. The baseline reading shows what is normal for that woman. During the first several months of pregnancy, blood pressure may drop a little. It often rises slightly later in the pregnancy, which is normal. That's because of the extra work the mother's body is doing.

High blood pressure in pregnancy is when there is an increase of 30 or more in the systolic pressure (top number). An increase of 15 or more in the diastolic pressure (bottom number) is also a sign of high blood pressure.

## CAUSES

A common cause of high blood pressure in pregnancy is preeclampsia. Three things usually come with preeclampsia:

- High blood pressure
- Swelling of the face, hands, fingers, or feet
- Protein in the urine

## Other symptoms of preeclampsia are:

- Sudden weight gain or gaining more than 2 pounds a week
- Headaches
- Vision problems like spots before the eyes or blurry vision
- Pain in upper belly
- Severe indigestion that doesn't go away

Preeclampsia happens most often during a first pregnancy, but can occur again. It goes away after delivery. Preeclampsia can lead to eclampsia. That's when convulsions also occur. Eclampsia can result in a coma for the mother.

## RISK FACTORS

The cause of preeclampsia is not known. The following may increase the risk for preeclampsia:

- First pregnancy or first pregnancy with a new partner
- Chronic high blood pressure or kidney disease
- Diabetes or lupus before the pregnancy
- Being overweight
- Being African American
- Pregnancy before age 20 or after age 35
- Being pregnant with more than one baby
- Preeclampsia in a past pregnancy or in a mother or sister

## Pregnancy Induced Hypertension (PIH)

High blood pressure can develop during pregnancy without other symptoms. This is called pregnancy induced hypertension (PIH). This type of high blood pressure often happens after the 20th week. After delivery, blood pressure usually goes back to normal.

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## TREATMENT

High blood pressure and preeclampsia can range from mild to severe. They can be treated with medical help and home care. But if serious symptoms are present, medicine and/or hospital care may be needed. This may include taking low-dose aspirin (81 mg/d) as preventive medication after 12 weeks of gestation in women at high risk for preeclampsia. The health care provider may induce labor (bring on labor). Or a Cesarean section (C-section) may be done.



When blood pressure remains high, not enough blood reaches the placenta. The fetus doesn't get enough oxygen and nutrients. That can cause:

- Growth problems for the fetus
- Placenta abruption.
- A baby that is born preterm, that has mental problems, is underweight, or stillborn

## TRIAGE QUESTIONS



Are you getting convulsions with these things happening:

- Your entire body stiffens.
- Your body jerks out of control.
- You black out for one or two minutes. When you come to, you feel confused and sleepy.

**NO**  
↓

**YES** ➔ **GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE**



Do you have shortness of breath or does your heart beat faster than it usually does?

**NO**  
↓

**YES** ➔ **GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE**



Do you have any of the following?

- Vaginal bleeding. Severe pain in your upper abdomen or cramps.
- Severe headaches, dizziness, double or blurred vision. Pain in your uterus and back

**NO**  
↓

**YES** ➔ **GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE**



Do you have a lot less movement from your baby than what you've been having? Or, no movement from the baby after you lie on your side 1 hour after you eat a meal?

**NO**  
↓

**YES** ➔ **GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE**



Do you have any of these signs?

- Rapid weight gain (more than 3 pounds a week in the 2nd trimester or more than 1 pound a week in the 3rd trimester)
- Swelling of the face, hands, ankles, or feet
- Pain in the upper right part of your abdomen

**NO**  
↓

**YES** ➔ **CALL DOCTOR**



Are you over 20 weeks pregnant? Do you have any of these signs with vaginal bleeding?

- Severe headache
- Sudden urine decrease

**NO**  
↓

**YES** ➔ **CALL DOCTOR**



**USE SELF-CARE**



## SELF-CARE

- Get a lot of rest. Sleep 8 to 12 hours at night. Take 2 naps during the day, if you can. When you sleep or rest, lie on your left side, as much as you can. This helps blood flow to the placenta. When you tire of lying on your left side, lie on your right side.
- Take medicine for high blood pressure as prescribed. If told to do so, take regular blood pressure readings at home. Ask your health care provider how to get a home test kit.
- Follow your health care provider's advice about exercise.
- Do things to relax. Examples: listen to soft music, put your feet up, take a nap. Watch a TV show that makes you laugh. Put your hand on your belly to feel your baby move.
- Don't take any medicine without your health care provider's okay. That includes cold or sinus medicines and antacids.