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Blood Pressure

When you walk into any medical appointment, usually one of the first things you'll experience is having your blood pressure taken. The puffy cuff that tightens around your arm while you anticipate the release and final reading is

part of the process. But what, exactly, do those numbers mean, and why does it really matter?

What is Blood Pressure?

Blood pressure is the measure of how hard your blood is pumping through your arteries. It's normal for blood pressure to rise and fall throughout the day, but it impacts your health when it remains high over time. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the biggest concern with high blood pressure is the risk of heart disease or stroke.

What Causes High Blood Pressure?

Many things can cause high blood pressure. Some of them include the following:

- Unhealthy lifestyle habits
- Nicotine use
- Diabetes
- Obesity

Knowing your average blood pressure helps you and your doctor take the necessary steps to ensure good health. First, you need to know two numbers associated with blood pressure: systolic and diastolic.

Systolic Blood Pressure

Your systolic blood pressure is the top number. It is the measure of the force your heart exerts on the walls of your arteries each time it beats.

Diastolic Blood Pressure

Your diastolic blood pressure is the bottom number. It is the force your heart exerts on artery walls between beats or when your heart is at rest.

Although both numbers are important for your health, higher systolic pressure

is what your doctor treats when you have high blood pressure. It's best to monitor both for optimal health. That is something you can do at home easily with simple to use blood pressure monitors.

Ways to Take Your Blood Pressure

There are several ways you can perform accurate blood pressure measurements at home.

Arm Blood Pressure Monitor

An arm blood pressure monitor is probably the one you see the most in your doctor's office uses. There are a couple of different home versions. One involves using a stethoscope and a manual blood pressure cuff, and some basic knowledge, so you know what sounds to listen for when taking the reading. An easier option is a digital blood pressure monitor with an arm cuff. Once you place the cuff on your arm above your elbow, you're ready to measure your blood pressure with a push of a button. Look for models with large, easy-to-read screens and the proper cuff size. It should also allow you to store several blood pressure readings at once.

Wrist Blood Pressure Cuff

Wrist blood pressure monitors work much like the arm cuff. Follow the directions on the cuff or in the guide for proper positioning on your wrist.

Thigh Blood Pressure Monitor

If arm or wrist blood pressure measurements are not an option, you can take your blood pressure with a thigh cuff. However, you'll also need a stethoscope for this option.

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