

QUALITY STANDARDS

Hypertension

A guide for people with
high blood pressure

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Ontario
Health

Ontario Health is committed to improving the quality of health care in the province in partnership with patients, health care professionals, and other organizations.

To do that, Ontario Health develops quality standards. These are documents that outline what high-quality care looks like for conditions or processes where there are large differences in how care is delivered, or where there are gaps between the care provided in Ontario and the care patients should receive. These quality standards set out important steps to improve care. They are based on current evidence and input from an expert committee that includes patients, caregivers, health care professionals, and researchers.

This patient guide accompanies the quality standard on [hypertension](#) (high blood pressure). It outlines the top 7 areas where health care providers can take steps to improve care for people over 18 years old who have high blood pressure. The patient guide also includes suggestions on what to discuss with your health care providers, as well as links to helpful resources.

What is high blood pressure?

When you have high blood pressure, your heart uses extra effort to pump blood through your body. That makes the pressure in your arteries higher than it should be.

You might not feel different or have any symptoms. But if your high blood pressure is not managed, it can damage your arteries, kidneys, or other organs. It can also lead to more serious health problems, such as a heart attack or stroke.

Having a diagnosis is important: you can take steps to stay healthy and live well.

When is high blood pressure an emergency?

Most people with high blood pressure do not have symptoms. If you have high blood pressure plus any of these symptoms, it could be a sign of an emergency:

- Chest pain
- Trouble breathing or speaking
- Sudden numbness in the face, arm, or leg
- Severe headache
- Loss of vision
- An irregular heartbeat

Call your family doctor, nurse practitioner, or 9-1-1.

Summary of the top 7 areas to improve care for people with high blood pressure

Quality Statement 1: Culturally Responsive Hypertension Care



What the standard says

People with hypertension or at risk for hypertension (and their families and caregivers) receive care from health care providers in a health care system that is culturally responsive and free from discrimination and racism. Health care providers work to build trust, address misconceptions about hypertension, remove barriers to accessing care, and provide equitable care.



What this means for you

Your health care providers should always treat you with respect and dignity and listen to you. You should be cared for in a way that respects your culture, values, and beliefs, and that is free from discrimination. Your health care providers should work with you to understand your needs and any difficulties you face in accessing care.

Quality Statement 2: Accurate Measurement of Blood Pressure



What the standard says

People receive automated office blood pressure measurement when in-office blood pressure measurement is performed.



What this means for you

Your blood pressure should be measured using an automated electronic device. Your health care provider should make sure that they use an arm cuff that fits you, and that you are seated quietly while the device takes several readings.

Testing for high blood pressure

Two numbers measure your blood pressure:

- The first number (called **systolic blood pressure**) measures the “high” point of the pressure in your arteries, when your heart beats
- The second number (called **diastolic blood pressure**) measures the “low” point of the pressure in your arteries, when your heart relaxes between beats

Using automated office blood pressure measurement at your doctor’s office, a high blood pressure reading is anything **higher than 135/85 mm Hg**.

Using ambulatory blood pressure monitoring or home blood pressure monitoring, a high blood pressure reading is anything **higher than 140/90 mm Hg**.

Quality Statement 3: Out-of-Office Assessment to Diagnose Hypertension



What the standard says

People with a high in-office blood pressure measurement receive ambulatory blood pressure monitoring to confirm a diagnosis of hypertension. Home blood pressure monitoring can be used if ambulatory blood pressure monitoring is not tolerated or not readily available, or if the patient prefers home monitoring.



What this means for you

Stress during medical visits can affect your blood pressure, so measuring it during your everyday activities is a good way to get a more accurate reading.

If your health care provider thinks you might have high blood pressure, they should offer you a device that measures your blood pressure many times over 24 hours, while you go about your daily activities. This is called “ambulatory blood pressure monitoring,” and it helps your health care provider confirm whether you have high blood pressure. If you do not want ambulatory blood pressure monitoring, or if it is not available, you can use a device that measures your blood pressure at home 2 times a day for 7 days instead.

Your health care provider should give you information about the device you use and show you how to use it properly.

Did you know?

1 in 4 Canadians has high blood pressure. Almost 1 in 5 people with high blood pressure do not know they have it.

Quality Statement 4: Health Behaviour Changes



What the standard says

People with hypertension or at risk for hypertension receive information and supports for health behaviour changes that can reduce their blood pressure and risk of cardiovascular disease, including physical exercise, weight reduction, alcohol consumption, diet, sodium and potassium intake, smoking cessation, and stress management.



What this means for you

Your diagnosis is the first step to managing your blood pressure and staying healthy.

Your health care professionals should talk with you about changes you can make to lower your blood pressure, such as getting enough exercise, losing weight, avoiding alcohol or drinking less, changing your diet, stopping smoking, and reducing stress.

They should give you information about programs and groups in your community that support these changes and align with your cultural values.

Why do I have high blood pressure?

Having high blood pressure might be unexpected, especially if you feel fine. People are more likely to develop high blood pressure if they:

- Have diabetes or kidney disease
- Smoke
- Are overweight
- Are less active
- Have a lot of salt in their diet
- Drink more than 2 alcoholic drinks each day
- Have a family history of high blood pressure
- Are over 65 years old

Quality Statement 5: Care Planning and Self-Management



What the standard says

People with hypertension collaborate with their health care professionals and use shared decision-making to create a care plan that includes a target blood pressure range, goals for health behaviour change, medication selection and adherence, recommended diagnostic testing, management of concurrent conditions, and when to follow up.



What this means for you

When you are diagnosed with high blood pressure, your health care professionals should work with you to give you information and a care plan that reflects your needs and goals.

Your care plan should include:

- A target range for your blood pressure
- Your goals for diet, weight, stress, or other health factors
- Your medication instructions and doses (if needed)
- Any tests you need to have
- When you should have a follow-up appointment

Your health care professionals should discuss your care plan with you in person and share it with you in writing.

Your care plan

You can do a lot to lower your blood pressure or keep it in a healthy range. Even simple changes can go a long way:

- Eating a diet that focuses on whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and plant-based proteins
- Limiting stress
- Walking, jogging, cycling, or swimming (as your health allows)
- Staying within a healthy weight range for your height and your age
- Eating less salt
- Drinking less alcohol (abstain or limit to no more than 2 drinks per day)

Your overall health and your age will affect your goals and the range that's right for your blood pressure.

Quality Statement 6: Monitoring and Follow-Up After a Diagnosis of Hypertension



What the standard says

People with hypertension who are actively modifying their health behaviours but not taking blood pressure medication are assessed by their health care professional every 3 to 6 months. Shorter intervals (every 1 to 2 months) may be needed for people with higher blood pressure. People who have been prescribed blood pressure medication are assessed every 1 to 2 months until their target blood pressure has been met on 2 consecutive visits, and then every 3 to 6 months.



What this means for you

Your health care professional should follow up with you regularly if you have high blood pressure.

They should see you every 3 to 6 months if you are working to lower your blood pressure by making changes such as getting more exercise, losing weight, or changing your diet.

If you have started taking medication for high blood pressure, they should see you every 1 to 2 months until your blood pressure has been on target at 2 back-to-back visits.

Write it down

If you can, take notes while you talk with your doctors, nurses, or other health care providers about high blood pressure. You can also ask a friend or family member to take notes for you.

Quality Statement 7: Improving Adherence to Medications



What the standard says

People who are prescribed blood pressure medication receive information and supports to help them take their medication regularly and as prescribed. At every follow-up visit for hypertension, they have discussions with their health care professionals about medication use, possible side effects, and any barriers they experience in taking their medications as prescribed.



What this means for you

Your health care professional should ask whether you are taking your blood pressure medication regularly, as prescribed. If you have difficulty taking your medication, they should give you information and support to help you take your medication as prescribed.

Taking medication

Medication works in different ways to lower the pressure in your arteries. For example, diuretics (also called “water pills”) help by removing extra salt and fluid from your system. You might need more than one type of blood pressure medication, and you might try different ones before finding the right combination.

Follow your health care team’s directions for taking medication. If you have trouble taking your medication:

- Ask if you can take a “once a day” or “twice a day” medication
- Use a chart or calendar to track when you take your medication
- Use a reminder tool (for example, an app on your phone)
- Get help from your pharmacist if your health care team is not available

Keep taking your medication, even when your blood pressure is in your target range. Be sure to talk with your care team if you are having any side effects.

Suggestions on what to discuss with your health care providers

Ask the care team:

- What could happen if I do not treat my high blood pressure?
- How often should I monitor my blood pressure?
- What community programs can help me with things like smoking, diet, and exercise?
- Is there any physical activity or exercise I should not do if I have high blood pressure?
- What tracking tools, technologies, or apps can help? What do they cost? Are there any programs that help pay for them?
- What are the possible side effects of this medication? Are there any reasons why someone should not take this medication?
- Can I manage my high blood pressure without medication, or with a lower dose?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- Where can I find more information about my medication?
- I am taking several medications. Can you review my medications to see if any of them affect each other? When would be the best time to take my medications so that they work well?
- Will I be taking this medication for the rest of my life?
- What should I do if I need to stop taking this medication?

Share with the care team:

- If there is anything about the diagnosis that you do not understand
- If you smoke, and how often
- If you have any other health problems they should know about
- If you have any side effects from your medication(s)
- If you are taking any other drugs or vitamins (they might affect your medication)
- If you are worried about the cost of medication
- If you have trouble taking medication or following your medication schedule
- What matters most to you about your care, and any social support you may need

Remember, everybody is different.

The support you need and the care plan you develop with your health care professionals will be unique to you.

Learn more

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction shares:

- [Information about alcohol use disorder, treatment options, and contact information for other organizations that can support you](#)
- Guidance for people who want to reduce their alcohol consumption

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) offers a [digital app called “Saying When”](#) to help people track their alcohol consumption.

[The Dietary Approaches to Stopping Hypertension \(DASH\) diet](#), supported by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, describes a way of eating to support healthy blood pressure.

The [Healthy Eating, Healthy Blood Pressure](#) booklet, from Hypertension Canada, walks you through how to change your eating habits to support healthy blood pressure.

[Hypertension Canada](#) recommends at-home monitors and other tools such as the fillable [Home Blood Pressure Log](#), which can help you track your blood pressure on your own.

The [Nicotine Dependence Clinic](#) at CAMH offers several specialized outpatient treatments for anyone who wants to quit or reduce their tobacco use.

Through the [Pharmacy Smoking Cessation Program](#), community-based pharmacists can provide people with counselling, resources, and therapies to stop smoking.

The Portico Network offers a [toolkit](https://www.porticonetwork.ca/web/alcohol-toolkit/tools-resources/resources-for-patients-and-families) to help people and their family members take their first steps toward care for problematic alcohol use and alcohol use disorder.

[The STOP Program](#), provided by CAMH, connects people to free medication and counselling to stop smoking.

Need more information?

If you have any questions or feedback about this guide, please contact us at QualityStandards@OntarioHealth.ca or 1-877-280-8538 (TTY: 1-800-855-0511).

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