

High blood pressure in pregnancy

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is a pressure in the arteries of your body. Your blood pressure can change due to:

- the strength of your heart beat
- the size of your blood vessels
- your emotions
- medications
- other health problems

Does blood pressure change in pregnancy?

Yes. Blood pressure usually goes down early in pregnancy. It is at its lowest around the middle of pregnancy. It returns to regular levels at the end of pregnancy.

These are normal body changes during pregnancy. Most women cannot feel these changes in their blood pressure. However, some pregnant women may feel light headed when their blood pressure is low or when they stand up quickly.

Can my blood pressure get too high?

Yes. Some women get high blood pressure. This usually happens in the second half of pregnancy. Deciding if your blood pressure is too high depends on what your blood pressure was like at the beginning of your pregnancy.

High blood pressure is called hypertension.

When this happens during pregnancy it can also be called:

- gestational hypertension
- toxemia
- pre-eclampsia

What if my blood pressure was high before my pregnancy?

Pregnancy may cause changes to your blood pressure. If your blood pressure was high before your pregnancy, it may become even higher during your pregnancy.

What causes high blood pressure in pregnancy?

The cause of high blood pressure that develops during pregnancy is not yet known.

Certain groups of women seem to have a greater chance of getting high blood pressure. You may have a greater chance of getting high blood pressure if you:

- have a health condition such as diabetes, kidney disease or heart problems
 - had high blood pressure in previous pregnancies
 - are pregnant for the first time
 - are a teenager
 - are pregnant with twins or triplets
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What problems may high blood pressure cause during pregnancy?

The effects of high blood pressure are different for each woman. High blood pressure can be mild or more severe. Severe high blood pressure may cause problems with your blood clotting, your liver's ability to function and you may have seizures. Medications can help control these problems.

What problems may high blood pressure cause for my baby?

The effects of high blood pressure are different for each baby. The effects on your baby's health depend on when you developed high blood pressure. There are greater effects if you develop high blood pressure early in pregnancy.

High blood pressure can cause problems with the flow of blood through the placenta. This can slow the baby's growth. Medication for high blood pressure can make this better by improving the flow of blood to the baby.

How will I know if I have high blood pressure?

Your blood pressure may rise during pregnancy without you noticing any change in how you feel. During your prenatal check-ups your doctor or midwife will check your blood pressure regularly, to see if it is rising.

With high blood pressure there may be an increased amount of protein in your urine when it is tested at your prenatal check-up. You may notice an increased amount of swelling, called edema.

Your high blood pressure can become worse. Warning signs that your blood pressure is getting worse include:

- headache
- sudden weight gain
- swelling or edema
- epigastric pain

Headache

High blood pressure may cause headaches or changes in your vision. You may see spots in front of your eyes or halos around lights.

Sudden weight gain

You may suddenly gain weight, when you have a lot of water being kept in your body. Sudden means a weight gain of more than 2 pounds a week.

Swelling or edema

Edema is water in the tissues of your body that looks like swelling. It is normal to have slight swelling in your fingers or feet. Swelling is more common in hot weather.

Epigastric pain

The changes in your body from high blood pressure can cause pain in your upper abdomen. This area is in the centre of your chest or to the right side. This pain may feel like indigestion.

If you notice any of these signs, call your doctor or midwife right away. If you are unable to reach your care provider, come to the Labour and Delivery Unit for assessment or call 911 for emergency medical care.

Please call the Labour and Delivery Unit at 905-521-5050 BEFORE coming to the hospital so we can get ready for you.

What care will I need if I have high blood pressure?

If you have high blood pressure, the type of care you need will depend on:

- how high your blood pressure is
- how many weeks pregnant you are
- what signs of high blood pressure you have

You may need more tests to check your health, and the health of your baby. These tests may include an ultrasound, blood tests and urine tests.

If your urine has more protein than usual, you may be asked to collect all your urine for 24 hours. Testing a 24 hour collection of urine is a more accurate way to measure the amount of protein.

Here are some of the treatments for high blood pressure.

Rest

Resting may lessen the mild signs of high blood pressure. If you need to rest, you may have to stay home from work. If you have small children, you may need some help for a few hours each day.

Medication

Your doctor may decide to give you medication to lower your blood pressure. Many different medications can be used. These pills are called antihypertensives. Some women may need to take more than one type of medication to help lower their blood pressure.

Admission to hospital

You may need to stay in the hospital so the doctors and nurses can watch you and your baby closely. In hospital you may have more tests or have your medications changed.

Delivery of your baby

Your doctor may decide that early delivery is necessary to help lower your blood pressure. This decision depends on your health, your baby's health and the number of weeks of the pregnancy. Your blood pressure will go down after your baby is born.

Please review these signs that your blood pressure is getting worse.

If you notice any of these signs, call your doctor or midwife right away.

- headache
- blurred vision, seeing spots before your eyes or halos around lights
- increased swelling or swelling of your face
- epigastric pain
- seizure (call 911)

If you are not able to reach your care provider, come to the Labour and Delivery Unit for assessment or call 911 for emergency medical care.

Please call the Labour and Delivery Unit at 905-521-5050 BEFORE coming to the hospital, so we can get ready for you.

If you have any questions or concerns or you would like more information, please call the 4B1 Maternal Fetal Medicine Clinic at 905-521-2644