

Symptoms of High Blood Pressure

How Do I Know When My Blood Pressure is High?

By: Thomas Pickering, MD, DPhil, FRCP, Director of Integrative and Behavioral Cardiology Program of the Cardiovascular Institute at Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York.

For the most part, you can't tell if you have high blood pressure, and most hypertensive people have no symptoms. So the only way to find out if it's high is to have it measured. This statement may come as a surprise, because many people are convinced that they can tell when their pressure is high. It's certainly true that when you get angry or anxious you may feel yourself tensing up, and your heart pounding. You may even go red in the face, something that's often erroneously associated with high blood pressure. And you're right: your pressure is likely to be high at such times. But that's perfectly normal, and unless you spend your life being permanently angry, which fortunately most of us don't, it doesn't mean much. High blood pressure is of concern only when it's still high when you are not angry or tense.

What Are the Symptoms of High Blood Pressure?

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Usually, there are no specific symptoms which indicate that someone has high blood pressure. But some population surveys have shown that a wide variety of common symptoms, such as sleep disturbance, emotional upsets, and dry mouth, are slightly commoner in people with higher pressures. The differences are small, however. Going red in the face, or feeling flushed, is not indicative of high blood pressure.

Headache and High Blood Pressure

If you asked a hundred people what is the commonest symptom of high blood pressure, the chances are that the majority would say headache. In fact, not only do most people with high blood pressure not have headaches any more than the rest of us, but when they do, it's usually not from the blood pressure. Merely having a high level of blood pressure inside your head does not normally produce any symptoms; if you lift a heavy weight, your pressure may go up by 30 or 40 mm Hg, but you don't get a headache.

What can cause headache is muscle tension. Any muscle that is tensed for long enough starts to hurt, and chronic tension in the scalp or neck muscles is a very common cause of headache. A study conducted many years ago shed some very interesting light on the relationship between headache and high blood pressure. Out of 104 people who had high blood pressure but were unaware of it, only three volunteered that they had headaches, although another 14 admitted it when asked. But of 96 people who had been told that they had high blood pressure, 71 said they had headaches. The simplest explanation for this finding is that being told that you have high blood pressure makes you start to worry, and that this in turn causes the headaches.

There is a much smaller number of patients, mostly with very high pressures, in whom headaches are directly related to the height of the blood pressure. In such individuals treating the blood pressure will relieve the symptoms.