

How to Get an Accurate Blood Pressure Reading

Getting an ACCURATE blood pressure (BP) reading is CRITICALLY IMPORTANT for your health and tends to get overlooked too often. Even small things like talking, crossing your legs, or walking briefly right before the reading can make your numbers look higher than your true baseline level.

These factors can raise BP by 5-15 points!

❖ Before Your Reading:

- It is best to check your blood pressure shortly after waking in the morning, but **after** emptying your bladder (a full bladder can raise BP).
- Avoid caffeine, smoking, or exercise at least 30 min - 1 hr before the reading.
- Sit down and relax for AT LEAST 5 MINUTES prior to the BP check (avoid standing immediately prior to the reading).

❖ During the Reading:

- Sit up straight and comfortably with your back supported, uncrossed legs, with feet flat on the floor.
- Apply the blood pressure cuff directly on your skin, not over any clothing.
- Rest your arm on a table so it is level with your heart (arm hanging too low or raised too high can affect the reading).
- Sit quietly, relax your body, keep your legs and arms still, and do not talk during the reading.

Home Blood Pressure Monitoring Schedule

❖ When You First Start or Adjust Medication:

- **Frequency:**
 - Take BP twice daily: once in the morning and once in the evening. (Upon awakening and at least 2 hrs after dinner)
 - Do this for 7-14 days in a row.
 - *****NOTE: Avoid caffeine, smoking, or exercise at least 30 minutes prior to your reading.**
- **How to measure each time:**
 - Follow instructions above on how to properly check blood pressure.
 - Take 2 readings, AT LEAST 1 minute apart (may use same arm).
 - Record both readings (these will be averaged).
- **Why TWO readings?**
 - The first reading is often a little higher because of subtle movement, cuff adjustment, or nerves.
 - A second reading, taken 1 minute later, usually gives a more stable value.
 - Averaging the two is generally considered more accurate.

- **Check BOTH Arms in the beginning:**

- If you've just started checking your blood pressure, it is best to compare both arms initially.
- Some people have a consistent difference between arms (often 5–10 mmHg).
 - A difference of up to 10 mmHg on the top number is generally considered **normal**.
- A **persistent** difference of **>10–15 mmHg** may signal vascular disease and should be discussed with your clinician.

- **How often to check both arms at home?**

- When first starting home monitoring:
 - Check BP in both arms, at least 2–3 times over several days.
 - Identify which arm consistently has the higher reading.
 - Use that arm for ALL FUTURE measurements.
- After establishing your baseline:
 - You DO NOT need to check both arms every time.
 - Re-check both arms maybe every 3–6 months or if you notice new symptoms (e.g., dizziness, unequal pulses, arm pain).
 - If your arm-to-arm difference suddenly increases (e.g., >15–20 mmHg difference when it wasn't before, that's a reason to alert your provider.



- **When to Be Cautious About Checking BP in Both Arms**

- Most people can safely check blood pressure in both arms, but there are a few situations where extra caution is needed:
 - **History of vascular disease** (such as subclavian artery stenosis, severe peripheral artery disease, or prior vascular surgery in one arm).
 - **Dialysis access (fistula or graft)** — blood pressure should NOT be taken on the access arm.
 - **Mastectomy with lymph node removal** — avoid the affected side to reduce risk of swelling (lymphedema).
 - **Recent injury or surgery** – on one or both arms.

****If you have any of these conditions, check with your healthcare provider about which arm is safest to use.****

- ❖ **For Routine Monitoring (Once Stable)**

- **Frequency:**
 - Check 2–3 days per week, at about the same time of day – preferably in the morning.
 - 1 reading is usually enough, unless it looks off → then repeat after 1 minute.
 - If no changes over a period of 2 weeks, you can decrease to checking only 1-2x/month.

- **NOTE: Always use the SAME ARM (the one that ran HIGHER when you compared both arms).**

Common Factors That Can Raise Blood Pressure

- **Caffeine** (coffee, tea, energy drinks)
- **Nicotine, Alcohol**
- **Decongestants** - NSAIDs (Ibuprofen, Naproxen, Advil, Aleve, etc.)
- **Recent physical exertion**
- **Pain**
- **Full bladder**
- **Cold environment**
- **Talking or Fidgeting** during measurement
- **Stress or Anxiety**
- **Incorrect cuff size** (too small → falsely high)
- **Crossed legs**
- **Improper positioning** (arm not at heart level)
- **Some herbal supplements** (e.g., licorice)

Special Situations

- **Medication changes, new symptoms (dizziness, headaches, chest pain, palpitations):**
 - Go back to the 7 to 14-day schedule with 2 readings each time. Notify your provider.
- **If you get an unusually high or low number:**
 - Rest 5 minutes, recheck. If still concerning, inform your provider.