Understanding Your Blood Pressure

What is blood pressure?
It is the force that the blood has, as it moves through arteries (similar to the pressure water has as it moves through a water hose). The measurement for blood pressure is expressed with two numbers, for example 120/80. The first number, 120, represents the blood pressure when it is pumped by the heart. The second number, 80, corresponds to the pressure when your heart is at rest between beats. The higher the numbers, the harder your heart is working.

What is considered a healthy blood pressure? When is it considered high?
For most people, a desirable and healthy blood pressure is around 120/80. If your blood pressure is 140/90 or greater, it is then considered high blood pressure. It is considered high when one or two of the numbers are high. For example: if someone has 150/80, the 150 is high, or 120/95, the 95 is high – therefore both are high blood pressure.

What causes high blood pressure?
For most cases, the exact cause is unknown. However, many factors are known to increase the chance that you will develop high blood pressure. Some of these factors are:

- being overweight
- not exercising enough
- eating foods with a high salt or saturated fats
- smoking
- drinking alcohol
- people over the age of 55 have higher risks
- people with diabetes have higher risk of having high blood pressure
- people who have family members with high blood pressure are also at higher risk

How do I know if I have high blood pressure?
Most people with high blood pressure do not have any symptoms. A doctor or clinic can check your blood pressure for you. You can also check it yourself at some pharmacies. Many factors cause your blood pressure to change throughout the day. It is lowest when you first wake up in the morning and increases when you work, exercise, or experience stress. For this reason, a doctor will want to measure your blood pressure on several different visits before determining if you have high blood pressure.

Why is it important to control high blood pressure?
High blood pressure is a serious disease. When your blood pressure is high, your heart has to work harder than it should to move blood to all parts of the body. If not treated, high blood pressure raises your chances of a stroke, heart attack, kidney problems, and even death.

What can I do to prevent or lower my high blood pressure?
You can control many of your activities to prevent or reduce your high blood pressure. Try to maintain a healthy weight. If you are overweight, try not to gain additional weight and reduce if gradually. Be active everyday by doing activities that you enjoy like walking, dancing, or playing sports. Reduce the amount of salt and fat in your diet. Cut back on alcohol consumption and the use of cigarettes.