

Talk Pressure: A Guide to Hypertension Communication

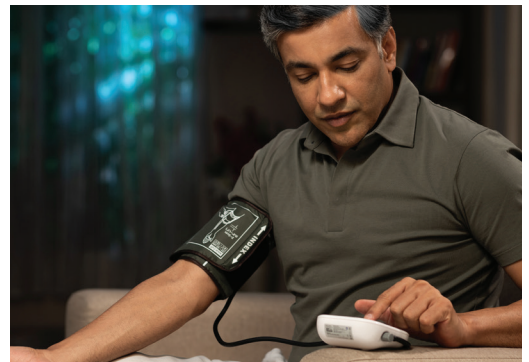
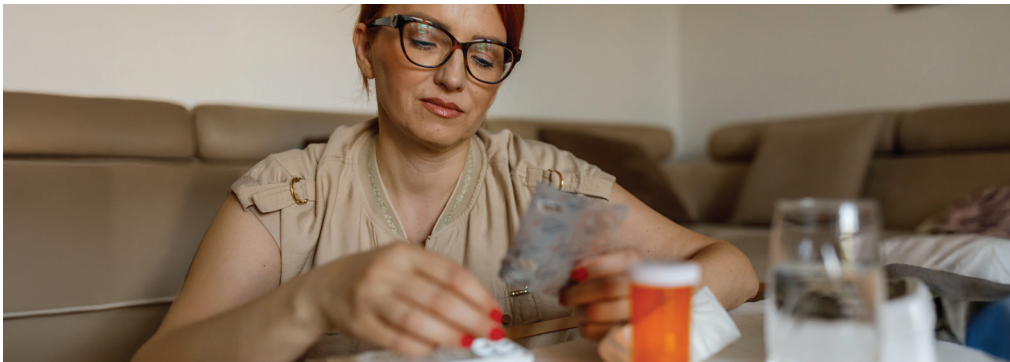


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Introduction

The challenge

Uncontrolled hypertension (high blood pressure) is a key risk factor for heart disease and stroke — 2 of the leading causes of death in the United States.¹ And it's common: more than 1 in 3 U.S. adults have uncontrolled hypertension. That's about 100 million people.²

Tackling hypertension is complex. Hypertension is sometimes called the “silent killer”³ because many people have no symptoms. As a result, they may not know they have it or prioritize getting it under control until after it causes a serious health problem, like heart attack, stroke, dementia, or kidney disease.⁴

Additionally, although about 67.9 million U.S. adults are recommended medicine to control their hypertension, about half remain untreated.⁵ And many have difficulty taking medicines as prescribed or controlling blood pressure through lifestyle measures because of barriers like:



- The cost or availability of medicines, heart-healthy foods, and safe places to get active
- Competing demands on financial and time resources — like employment, caring for loved ones, and other health conditions — that make it hard to prioritize hypertension control
- Stigma around hypertension and taking medicines for blood pressure control

¹ Xu J, Murphy SL, Kockanek KD, Arias E. Mortality in the United States, 2021. NCHS Data Brief. 2022;456. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

² Hypertension cascade: hypertension prevalence, treatment and control estimates among US adults aged 18 Years and older applying the criteria from the American College of Cardiology and American Heart Association's 2017 Hypertension Guideline—NHANES 2017–2020. CDC. May 12, 2023. Accessed August 2025.

<https://millionhearts.hhs.gov/data-reports/hypertension-prevalence.html>

³ American Heart Association. What is high blood pressure? May 23, 2024. Accessed August 2025.

<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/high-blood-pressure/the-facts-about-high-blood-pressure>

⁴ CDC. About high blood pressure. Published January 28, 2025. Accessed August 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/high-blood-pressure/about/index.html#:~:text=Signs%20and%20symptoms,High%20blood%20pressure%20usually%20has%20no%20warning%20signs%20or%20symptoms,you%20have%20high%20blood%20pressure>

⁵ Estimated hypertension prevalence, treatment, and control among US adults: tables. CDC. May 12, 2023. Accessed August 2025. <https://millionhearts.hhs.gov/files/Estimated-Hypertension-Prevalence-tables-508.pdf#page=3>

The barriers to hypertension control don't only affect patients. Health care and public health professionals also face challenges in effectively addressing hypertension. Limitations on patient touchpoints — like the need to address many priorities during short clinic visits — can make it difficult to have in-depth conversations about heart-healthy lifestyle changes, strategies for taking medicine as prescribed, and other aspects of long-term blood pressure management. In addition, some professionals may not feel confident about explaining hypertension's effects on the body or the steps to achieve control in ways that resonate with the people they serve.

The result? Many U.S. adults are missing out on the full benefits of treatment for their hypertension.^{6,7}

The opportunity

Hypertension is the most modifiable risk factor for many life-altering and life-threatening conditions, like stroke, heart attack, and kidney disease.⁸ This risk scales with the duration of uncontrolled hypertension,⁹ so getting blood pressure under control as early as possible is one of the best ways to prevent death and other serious health consequences.

Strong communication between people and health care or public health professionals has a central role to play in modifying the risk posed by hypertension and supporting more adults in achieving control. Clear communication — including actively listening to individuals' concerns, talking through issues they're encountering, and making decisions together — not only helps them understand their treatment options but can also make them more likely to stick with their care plans. Supporting people with hypertension in this way creates a foundation for more effective care and better long-term health outcomes.¹⁰



⁶ Mentz RJ, Greiner MA, Muntner P, Shimbo D, Sims M, Spruill TM, Banahan BF, Wang W, Mwasongwe S, Winters K, Correa A, Curtis LH, O'Brien EC. Intentional and unintentional medication non-adherence in African Americans: insights from the Jackson Heart Study. *Am Heart J*. 2018;200:51-59. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6005189/>

⁷ Tajeu GS, Kent ST, Huang L, Bress AP, Cuffee Y, Halpern MT, Kronish IM, Krousel-Wood M, Mefford MT, Shimbo D, Muntner P. Antihypertensive medication nonpersistence and low adherence for adults <65 years initiating treatment in 2007-2014. *Hypertension*. 2019;74(1). <https://www.ahajournals.org/doi/full/10.1161/HYPERTENSIONAHA.118.12495>

⁸ Jones DW, Ferdinand KC, Taler SJ, et al. 2025 AHA/ACC/AANP/AAPA/ABC/ACCP/ACPM/AGS/AMA/ASPC/NMA/PCNA/SGIM guideline for the prevention, detection, evaluation, and management of high blood pressure in adults: a report of the American College of Cardiology/American Heart Association Joint Committee on Clinical Practice Guidelines. *J Am Coll Cardiol*. Published online August 14, 2025. Accessed August 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacc.2025.05.007>

⁹ Zheng Y, Gao X, Jia H-Y, Li F-R, Ye H. Influence of hypertension duration and blood pressure levels on cardiovascular disease and all-cause mortality: a large prospective cohort study. *Front Cardiovasc Med*. 2022;9:948707. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9618611/>

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

CDC Foundation's National Hypertension Control Program has created this guide to help public health and health care professionals communicate effectively about hypertension with the people they serve.

No matter your role, every time you speak with a patient or community member about hypertension control, you have an opportunity to make a real difference. By helping people understand the benefits of getting to and keeping their blood pressure in a healthy range, you're helping the people you serve protect themselves and their loved ones from devastating outcomes like stroke, dementia, and other life-changing health problems.

How to use this guide

CDC Foundation's Talk Pressure Guide introduces the 4-part C.A.R.E. approach to encourage hypertension control. This approach can support anyone who communicates about hypertension — like clinicians, health educators, public health department staff, and more — in achieving their goals with the patients and communities they serve.

The **C.A.R.E. approach** defines 4 key objectives of hypertension communication that can contribute to better blood pressure control:

- **Close Knowledge Gaps** by explaining core facts about hypertension and its risks.
- **Affirm Productive Beliefs** by reinforcing that hypertension control is possible and worth the effort.
- **Reframe Barriers** by addressing limiting beliefs, misconceptions, and challenges that may hold patients back.
- **Encourage Next Steps** by empowering patients to take clear, achievable actions.



In this guide, you'll find:

- Research-based messages aligned with the four key areas in C.A.R.E. that you can use in conversations with patients
- Practical communication tips, like dos and don'ts to guide how you deliver your messages
- Resources that can help you plan your own communications — whether you're preparing for one-on-one patient conversations or broader public health campaigns

The Talk Pressure Guide is grounded in research.

To inform the messaging and tips included in this guide, CDC Foundation conducted research with:

- Health care professionals with expertise in hypertension diagnosis, prevention, and treatment, like pharmacists, cardiologists, and other clinicians – to identify effective approaches for increasing hypertension control among U.S. adults
- Adults with hypertension from across the United States – to identify knowledge gaps, as well as information and communication tactics that would empower them to take action to control their hypertension



What to say

In this section, you'll find evidence-based messages aligned with the C.A.R.E. approach. Under each key area in C.A.R.E. — Close Knowledge Gaps, Affirm Productive Beliefs, Reframe Barriers, Encourage Next Steps — the messages are grouped by topic to help you quickly identify what you need for a specific conversation. For example, messages developed to Close Knowledge Gaps are organized to answer common patient questions about hypertension control, whereas messages crafted to Affirm Productive Beliefs are organized to support specific, powerful beliefs that can help inspire patients to keep working toward control.

Using these messages can help you prepare for personalized conversations or create tailored materials about hypertension that follow best practices for clear communication. And investing in clear communication now has long-term benefits, including better patient follow through on care plans, strengthened trust and relationships with the people you serve, and more efficient follow-up.

As you plan your communication, it's important to remember that **not every person needs messaging about all 4 key areas in C.A.R.E.** Meeting your patients where they are — by considering their existing knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes — will help your communication resonate. Think about what you know about the person or people you're trying to reach and how they think and feel about hypertension control. These questions can help you get started:

- What do they already know about hypertension? What misconceptions might they hold?
- What barriers are stopping them from achieving hypertension control?
- What motivators or supports can help them overcome those barriers?
- What actions can help them make progress toward the goal of hypertension control?

Close Knowledge Gaps



Use these messages to boost a person's knowledge about:

- Blood pressure basics and screening options
 - The threat of uncontrolled high blood pressure
 - The benefits of blood pressure control
 - The importance of time
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What is high blood pressure?

- Your heart pumps blood through blood vessels in every part of your body. Your blood pressure is how hard your blood is pushing on the walls of your blood vessels with every beat of your heart.
 - When your blood pressure is too high, your heart has to work very hard to get blood to where it needs to go. This is called hypertension or high blood pressure.
 - People with uncontrolled high blood pressure have blood pressure numbers that are higher than 130 over 80.
 - High blood pressure often has no symptoms, and it doesn't go away on its own. You might feel fine while uncontrolled blood pressure is damaging your body over time.
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What does controlling blood pressure mean?

- Control means keeping your blood pressure in a healthy range — the goal is under 130 over 80.
 - Everyone's journey to blood pressure control looks different, but one thing is true for everyone: if your blood pressure is higher than 130 over 80, it's uncontrolled, raising your risk of serious health consequences, like stroke and dementia.
 - Controlling high blood pressure isn't about getting your numbers down once. It's about managing your blood pressure over time. That means building daily habits to protect your brain, heart, eyes, and kidneys for life — like taking medicines, eating heart-healthy foods, getting plenty of activity, and managing stress.
-

Why is it important to measure blood pressure?

- The only way to know for sure if your blood pressure is high or in a healthy range is to measure it with a blood pressure device.
 - You can get a health care professional to measure your blood pressure at a doctor's office, health clinic, or pharmacy — or you can get a blood pressure device to use at home.
-

- Blood pressure changes constantly, based on things like activity, stress, caffeine, and even your posture. Some people even experience higher readings while they're at the doctor's office — called "white coat syndrome." That's why it's important to try and measure and record your blood pressure regularly, not just at doctor visits.
- If you're working toward blood pressure control, try to check your numbers at least twice a day — in the morning and in the evening. Record your numbers on your blood pressure device or on paper. Then share your record with a health care professional so they can see how your numbers change over time.
- When it comes to blood pressure, patterns matter more than single readings. If you get a high reading, try taking it again in a minute or 2. That'll help you get the most accurate number possible. And remember: blood pressure changes constantly. The goal is keeping your blood pressure in a healthy range over months and years, not moment to moment.



How does uncontrolled high blood pressure affect the body?

- Uncontrolled high blood pressure doesn't just affect your heart. Over time, it can harm many different parts of your body, including your brain, eyes, and more.
- If high blood pressure stays uncontrolled over time, it can lead to stroke, dementia, kidney disease, heart attack, and other conditions that can permanently change your life.
- Uncontrolled high blood pressure damages the blood vessels in your brain. This damage can make it hard for your brain to get enough oxygen and nutrients. Over time, this can lead to memory loss, brain fog, and even dementia.

How could uncontrolled high blood pressure affect quality of life?

- Uncontrolled high blood pressure takes a toll on your heart, but that's not all. It can affect your energy, your vision, and even your memory.
- Left uncontrolled, high blood pressure can cause sexual problems. It can make it more difficult to get an erection, enjoy sex, or get pregnant.
- If uncontrolled high blood pressure causes a serious health problem, it doesn't only mean more doctor visits. It can make it everyday life harder — from getting around to enjoying family time and your favorite hobbies.

How can controlling high blood pressure help my life?

- The sooner you get your blood pressure under control, the lower your odds of having a life-changing health problem, like stroke, kidney disease, dementia, or heart attack.
- Everyone wants to be there for special milestones with family and friends. But if a stroke, dementia, or heart attack takes away your ability to care for yourself, you might not be able to. Prioritizing high blood pressure control now gives you the best chance to stay healthy and take part in your loved ones' lives for the long term.
- Life is stressful enough as it is — and worrying about uncontrolled high blood pressure just adds more stress. Get rid of some of that stress by tackling blood pressure control head-on. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll find a plan that works for your life and gets you the blood pressure-lowering results you need.



Why is it important to control blood pressure as soon as possible?

- The damage caused by uncontrolled high blood pressure builds over time. Don't wait — get your blood pressure under control before it controls you.
- Uncontrolled high blood pressure doesn't wait to damage your body until you're older — the damage starts right away and gets worse over time.
- Every day with uncontrolled high blood pressure puts your health at risk. Acting now gives you the best chance to prevent serious health conditions.



Affirm Productive Beliefs



Use these messages to help show empathy and provide affirmation to assure people:

- They're not alone
- They can find a plan that works for them
- They can achieve control 1 step at a time

You're not alone: A lot of people are managing their blood pressure, too.

- If you have high blood pressure, you're not alone. About half of U.S. adults have high blood pressure, and most struggle to get it controlled.
- Getting your blood pressure into a healthy range and keeping it there isn't always easy. It can help to remember that thousands of people are on the same journey — checking their numbers, taking medicine, working with health care professionals, and making healthier changes alongside you.
- Everyone's path to blood pressure control is a little different, but many people share some common steps. Most people manage their blood pressure through a mix of taking 1 or more blood pressure medicines along with healthy habits (like eating a low-salt diet, staying active, and managing stress).



You can find a plan for blood pressure control that works for you.

- Blood pressure control is about finding the right plan for you — that is, the right mix of medicines and healthy habits that work for your life.
- The best way to create a personalized treatment plan is to partner with a health care professional. After all, they're an expert in how to manage high blood pressure, and you're the expert in...you! By talking about treatment options that can work for your unique life, you and a health care professional can make a plan to get to control.
- When it comes to controlling high blood pressure, you don't have to plan alone — a blood pressure professional can help! When you share details about your life, a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist can help you find healthier food swaps, new ways to get active, personalized tactics for managing stress, and medicines to help you get your blood pressure into a healthy range.

- We don't always stay exactly the same, and neither will our blood pressure control plan! Over time, you might find that parts of your plan that worked before don't seem to be working so well anymore. Whatever's going on, you can discuss it with a health care professional and work together to update your plan, so you can stay in control.
- It's natural to want to prioritize "natural" ways to control high blood pressure, like diet and exercise. But there are downsides to relying on healthy habits alone. For most people, they're not enough to keep blood pressure in a healthy range over the long term. Making lifestyle changes alone isn't enough for most people to get to blood pressure control.
- Delaying starting medicine gives uncontrolled blood pressure extra time to damage your brain, eyes, heart, and more. You can use blood pressure medicine as part of a holistic plan to get to your goal as fast as possible and keep your blood pressure under control for the long term.



Blood pressure control happens one step at a time.

- Controlling your blood pressure doesn't mean changing your whole lifestyle in a day. In fact, it's a lot easier to make changes that stick if you take it one step at a time — like giving a new medicine some time to start working or starting to watch your salt. Remember: you don't have to do it all at once.
- Working to get your blood pressure under control and keep it there takes commitment. That's why it's so important to celebrate your wins! Every time you get a blood pressure reading that's in a healthy range, it's a reason to celebrate better health and better control for you.
- Blood pressure control is a journey, not a sprint. Making consistent changes that support healthy blood pressure over time is more important than occasional bursts of perfection. Having an off day or a setback doesn't erase your progress. What matters is getting back on track and focusing on your long-term goals.

Reframe Barriers



Use these messages to help address barriers and limiting beliefs by advising people that:

- High blood pressure control is a journey — and they can get there in time
- High blood pressure control is a team effort
- Medicine is an important tool for successful high blood pressure control

Blood pressure control is a long game, not a one-time fix.

- Controlling high blood pressure is not a one-time thing. It's a life-long journey toward your healthiest self.
- Most people don't get everything right on the first (or second or third) try. The path to success is a journey, and blood pressure control isn't any different. If something about your plan isn't working for you, talk to a health care professional about making a change.
- If you've been trying to get to a healthy blood pressure for a while, it can be frustrating if you're not seeing results. Don't give up. Every time you get some heart-pumping activity or work with a health care professional to adjust your treatment plan, you're one step closer to control — and one step closer to a lower risk of stroke and dementia.
- Whether you're new to managing your blood pressure or you've been working toward a goal for a while, there's a next step that's right for you. Depending on where you are on your journey, that might look like trying medicine for the first time or adjusting your dose to keep your numbers on track. Wherever you are, don't lose sight of your goal or your path.

Blood pressure control is a team effort.

- Getting to a healthy blood pressure takes a team—and you're the MVP! Work together with health care professionals, like a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist, to come up with a winning plan that's right for you
- Controlling high blood pressure is a team effort. And you need a team of health care professionals who get you and what you need. That means they take the time to answer your questions, explain their recommendations, and listen to your concerns.



- If it doesn't feel like your blood pressure control team is working for you, speak up! Let the doctor, nurse, or pharmacist know about your concerns, and if the situation doesn't get better, think about finding other professionals to join your team. That might look like making an appointment with a different doctor to get a second opinion, calling a new clinic to see if they can fit you in, or asking a health care professional to recommend a different pharmacy in your neighborhood.
- Whether it's struggling to make habits stick, having trouble taking your medicine, or just not getting the results you need, a health care professional can help adjust your plan to fit your life and your unique blood pressure control journey.

Medicine is an important tool that can help you get to blood pressure control and stay there.

- Healthy lifestyle changes are a good part of a holistic plan, but without medicine, they're rarely enough to get into a healthy blood pressure range. If your health care professional recommends medicine for your high blood pressure, you're not alone. Most people with high blood pressure need to take medicine to keep it under control.
- Getting on blood pressure medicine is a big step — and you might be wondering about costs, side effects, and more. It can help to remember that medicine isn't one-size-fits-all: There are different options that work well for different people.
- Some blood pressure medicines do have side effects for some people. And it's okay to be nervous about that. For most people and most medicines, the side effects are temporary — often lasting just a month or two.
- Don't let side effects stop you from getting the benefits of blood pressure medicine. When you pair medicine with healthy habits to keep your blood pressure under control, you're doing everything you can to protect your brain, eyes, heart, kidneys and more — and you're giving yourself a better chance to stay healthy and active for the long term.



E ncourage Next Steps



These messages help give people clear next steps that people with hypertension can take along their journey toward blood pressure control. To keep your communication focused and effective, it's best to focus on 1 step at a time. You can choose the step to focus on based on both your communication goal and where your audience is at.

For people who are new or returning to blood pressure control

- Get an appointment with a health care professional to address concerns about blood pressure.
- Make a plan with a health care professional that includes concrete steps to achieve realistic goals.
- Access resources to learn more or find local supports for blood pressure control.
- Talk about any barriers you're facing, so you and a health care professional can find solutions together.
- Discuss signs of serious blood pressure-related health problems to watch for and make sure you know when to seek urgent care.
- Ask about how to keep track of your blood pressure between visits, like by using a blood pressure device at home.



For people who are engaged in ongoing blood pressure control

- Track your blood pressure regularly and share your numbers with a health care professional to guide adjustments to your treatment plan.
- Talk to a health care professional about your progress and how it's going at every visit.
- Discuss any parts of your blood pressure control plan that aren't serving you, so you can decide how to adjust the plan together.
- Bring a trusted person, like a family member or friend, to your appointments to help ask questions and advocate for you.

How to say it

When communicating about a topic that's as complex as hypertension control, it's not only about what you say. **How** you present your message plays a key role in whether it resonates with your audience — or empowers them to take action. Explore this section to find recommendations for using hypertension control messages effectively, as well as common pitfalls to avoid.



Do these things

You won't be able to use every one of these recommendations in every communication — and nor should you! Consider what you know about your audience and where they're coming from to decide how to frame your communication.

Highlight the impact on life right now

Adults juggle a lot on any given day — raising kids, caring for aging parents, managing jobs, and more. Hypertension often has no symptoms, so it's easy to push aside. It can help to emphasize that uncontrolled blood pressure can drain energy, strain relationships, and make it harder to meet daily goals.

Bring the future to life

Many people know uncontrolled hypertension leads to stroke or heart attack, but those risks may feel distant. Help them picture what life could look like after a serious health event — like needing help with basic tasks after a stroke or struggling to remember loved ones' names with dementia. Making the future tangible can motivate action today.

Connect to what people care about

Many put loved ones first, even at the expense of their own health. Remind them that controlling blood pressure is the best way to stay strong and present for family, friends, pets, and community.

Balance the potential threat with the benefits of control

Scare tactics alone can be discouraging. Pair the reality of health risks with clear benefits of control. Show that reaching blood pressure goals is possible and worthwhile.

Address the overwhelm

Managing hypertension can feel daunting. Break it down. Encourage doable next steps — like scheduling an appointment or setting reminders for medicine. Each step builds momentum toward control.

Avoid doing these things

Doing these things may make your communication less effective.

Don't be too scary

Be honest about the risks of uncontrolled hypertension, but avoid fear tactics. Overly threatening messages can backfire, making people defensive or dismissive. Instead, pair the threat with clear actions they can take.¹¹

Don't make assumptions about “small steps”

What feels like a minor step for one person can be a major challenge for another. For example, starting a new medicine may be easy with insurance but costly without it. Rather than saying “small step,” encourage people to take “one step” or “your next step.”

Don't present barriers without solutions

Naming barriers shows empathy, but dwelling on them can be discouraging. Balance barriers with solutions — like local programs that improve access to care or practical tips to make treatment fit daily life.



¹¹ Ruiter RAC, Kessels LTE, Peters, E-JY, Kok G. Sixty years of fear appeal research: current state of the evidence. *Int J Psychol.* 2014;49(2):63-70.

Additional Resources

Here are a few additional resources you can use:

- The Million Hearts® Initiative's Live to the Beat website serves as an example of how to communicate effectively about cardiovascular disease for a specific audience: <https://www.livetothethebeat.org/>
- The American Heart Association offers a wide range of English and Spanish language patient education materials about blood pressure basics and managing hypertension, which can help bolster your communication: <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/high-blood-pressure/find-high-blood-pressure-tools--resources>
- The Public Health Communications Collaborative's Strategies for Developing Culturally Driven Public Health Communications guide provides tips for tailoring your communication to your audience's cultures, values, and beliefs: <https://publichealthcollaborative.org/communication-tools/strategies-for-developing-culturally-driven-public-health-communications/>
- The Stanford Social Innovation Review offers this resource on finding the right messenger to reach your audience: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/finding_the_right_messenger_for_your_message



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