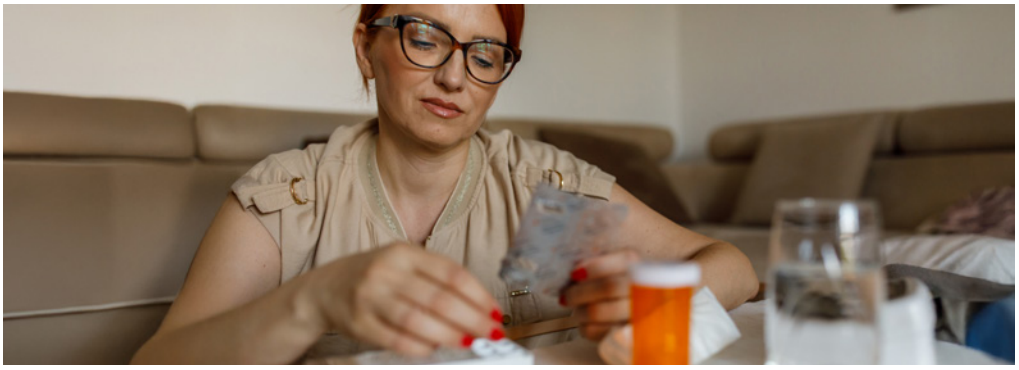
Talk Pressure:
A Guide to Hypertension Communication









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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]

Because hypertension often has no symptoms, many people may not know they have it or may not prioritize getting it under control until after it causes a serious health problem, like heart attack, stroke, dementia, or kidney disease.[3]

Additionally, although about 67.9 million U.S. adults are recommended medicine to control their hypertension, about half remain untreated.[4] And many have difficulty taking medicines as prescribed or controlling blood pressure through lifestyle measures because of barriers like cost or availability, competing demands on time, or stigma. The result? Many U.S. adults are missing out on the full benefits of treatment for their hypertension.[5, 6]

The barriers to hypertension control don't only affect patients. Health care and public health professionals also face challenges in effectively addressing hypertension, including limited time with patients during visits and challenges explaining hypertension in ways that patients can understand.

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[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] 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

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[5] 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/

[6] 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

The opportunity

Hypertension is the most modifiable risk factor for many life-altering and life-threatening conditions, like stroke, heart attack, and kidney disease.[7] What's more, the longer hypertension remains uncontrolled, the greater the risk it poses.[8] 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 with hypertension 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 not only helps people understand their treatment options but can also make them more likely to stick with their care plans.[9]

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.

What's inside the guide

This 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:

- **C**lose Knowledge Gaps by explaining core facts about hypertension and its risks.
- **A**ffirm Positive Beliefs by reinforcing that hypertension control is possible and worth the effort.
- **R**eframe Barriers by addressing limiting beliefs, misconceptions, and challenges that may hold patients back.
- **E**ncourage Next Steps by empowering patients to take clear, achievable actions.

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[7] 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

[8] 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/

[9] *Ibid.*

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.

Close Knowledge Gaps

The messages in this section answer common questions about high blood pressure and how to control it. Use them 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 acting now**



What is 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.

What is high blood pressure?

- When your blood pressure numbers are often higher than 130 over 80, it's called uncontrolled high blood pressure or hypertension.
- When your blood pressure is too high, your heart has to work very hard to get blood to where it needs to go.
- 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 in ways you can't yet see.

What does controlling blood pressure mean?

- Control means keeping your blood pressure in a healthy range — a normal blood pressure reading is 120 over 80 or lower, and if you have high blood pressure, the goal is to keep readings at 130 over 80 or lower.
- Controlling high blood pressure isn't a one-time fix — it's a lifelong journey. 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 use a home blood pressure device.
- Blood pressure changes based on things like activity, stress, caffeine, and even your posture. That's why it's important to measure and record your blood pressure regularly, not just at doctor visits.



How should I measure my blood pressure at home?

- If you're working toward blood pressure control, try to check your numbers at least twice a day — once in the morning and once in the evening. It's best if you can check your numbers at about the same times each day.
- Every time you check your blood pressure, 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, wait a minute or two and take it again. This can help a health care professional see if your blood pressure stays high or if it comes down quickly.

How does uncontrolled high blood pressure affect the body?

- If high blood pressure stays uncontrolled over time — with readings that are often higher than 130 over 80 — it can lead to stroke, dementia, kidney disease, heart attack, and other conditions that can permanently change your life.
- 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.
- In the brain, uncontrolled high blood pressure can limit 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.
- It can also cause sexual problems, like difficulty getting an erection, enjoying sex, or becoming pregnant.

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

- High blood pressure doesn't wait for symptoms. It starts harming your heart, brain, and kidneys right away — and you often can't feel the damage until it's too late. The sooner you take action, the sooner you can stop more damage from happening.
- The sooner you get your blood pressure under control, the lower your odds of having a life-changing health problem. In fact, keeping your blood pressure under 130 over 80 can reduce your risk of dementia by 15%.[10]
- 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 be there for your loved ones in the long term.
- Life is stressful enough as it is — and worrying about uncontrolled high blood pressure can add 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 control plan that works for your life and gets you the blood pressure-lowering results you need.

[10] He J, Zhao C, Zhong S, Ouyang N, Sun G, Qiao L, Yang R, Zhao C, Liu H, Tent W, Liu X, Wang C, Liu S, Chen C-S, Williamson JD, Sun Y. Blood pressure reduction and all-cause dementia in people with uncontrolled hypertension: an open-label, blinded-endpoint, cluster-randomized trial. *Nat Med.* 2025;21:2054-2061. https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-025-03616-8

Affirm Positive Beliefs

Here, find messages that support positive beliefs that can help people with hypertension feel motivated and confident in taking action to control their blood pressure. 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 one 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 are working to get it under control.
- Thousands of people are taking the same steps as you are — checking their numbers, working with health care professionals, taking medicine, and making healthier lifestyle changes.
- Everyone's path to blood pressure control is a little different, but 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, quitting smoking, 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 to get closer to a normal range of 120 over 80 — that is, the right mix of medicines and healthy habits that work for your life.
- The best way to create a personalized control plan is to partner with a health care professional, including a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist. They're experts in how to manage high blood pressure, and you're the expert in what works for your day-to-day life.
- Together, you can create a plan that fits your life. A complete control plan combines keeping track of your numbers with taking blood pressure medicines and building healthy habits that are right for you, like cutting back on salt, staying active, quitting smoking, and managing stress.
- As your life changes, your blood pressure control plan can change too. What matters is staying in touch with a health care professional and adjusting your plan as needed, so you can stay in control.
- For most people, lifestyle changes like diet and exercise alone aren't enough to keep blood pressure in a healthy range. Blood pressure medicine can be an essential part of a holistic plan, helping you protect your heart, brain, and kidneys while you build lasting healthy habits.

Blood pressure control happens one step at a time.

- Controlling your blood pressure doesn't mean changing your whole lifestyle overnight. It's about making small, steady changes that stick — like giving a new medicine some time to work or cutting back on salt.
- Getting your blood pressure under control and keeping it there takes commitment and patience. So remember to celebrate your wins along the way! Every blood pressure reading in a healthy range is a sign that your efforts may be paying off.
- 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

These messages are designed to overcome common barriers and limiting beliefs that may stop people from achieving control. Use them to help people understand 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 isn't something you do once and move on from — it's a lifelong journey toward your healthiest self.
- It's normal for your control plan to evolve. If your medicine or habits don't seem to be working, that doesn't mean you've failed — it means it's time to adjust.
- Staying in touch with a health care professional helps keep your plan on track and your numbers in a healthy range.
- It can be frustrating if your numbers don't improve as quickly as you'd like, but control takes time and consistency. 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.



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 create a winning plan that fits your life.
- A good blood pressure control team takes 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 getting a second opinion from a different doctor, calling a new clinic to see if they can fit you in, or looking for a different pharmacy in your neighborhood.

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 complete plan, but without medicine, they're rarely enough to get into a healthy blood pressure range.
- If a 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.
- Starting blood pressure medicine is a big step — and you might be wondering about costs, side effects, and more. Remember that medicine isn't one-size-fits-all: There are many safe, effective options, and a health care professional can help you find what works best for you.
- 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 giving yourself a better chance to stay healthy and active for the long term.



Encourage Next Steps

These messages help give people clear next steps that they 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. These next steps are organized into broad categories to help you meet your audience where they are:

Developing a blood pressure control plan with a health care professional

- Get an appointment to address concerns about blood pressure.
- Discuss a realistic blood pressure goal — and identify specific steps to get you to that goal.
- Learn what signs of serious blood pressure-related health problems to watch for — and when to seek urgent care.
- Bring a trusted person, like a family member or friend, to your appointment to help ask questions and advocate for you.
- Schedule a follow-up appointment to check in and keep fine-tuning your plan.

Staying consistent with a blood pressure control plan

- Talk about any barriers that might make it harder to stick to your blood pressure control plan, so you and a health care professional can find solutions together.
- Keep track of your blood pressure between health care visits, like by using a blood pressure device at home.
- Remember to take your blood pressure medicine every day. Linking it to part of your daily routine, like eating a meal or brushing your teeth, can make staying consistent easier.
- Take time to celebrate progress and small wins — recognizing your successes can help with staying motivated to stick with your plan.



Reviewing and adjusting your blood pressure control plan with a health care professional

- Share your blood pressure numbers to guide adjustments to your control plan. If your readings are often higher than 130 over 80, a professional can recommend changes to your plan to help bring them down.
- Talk about what your numbers mean at every visit — so you understand when your plan is working and when it might be time to make a change.
- Discuss any parts of your blood pressure control plan that aren't working for your life, so you can decide how to adjust the plan together.

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

Not every recommendation will fit every situation — and that's okay. Think about your audience: what matters to them, what challenges they face, and how you can meet them where they are.

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. Because hypertension often has no symptoms, it's easy to overlook. 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

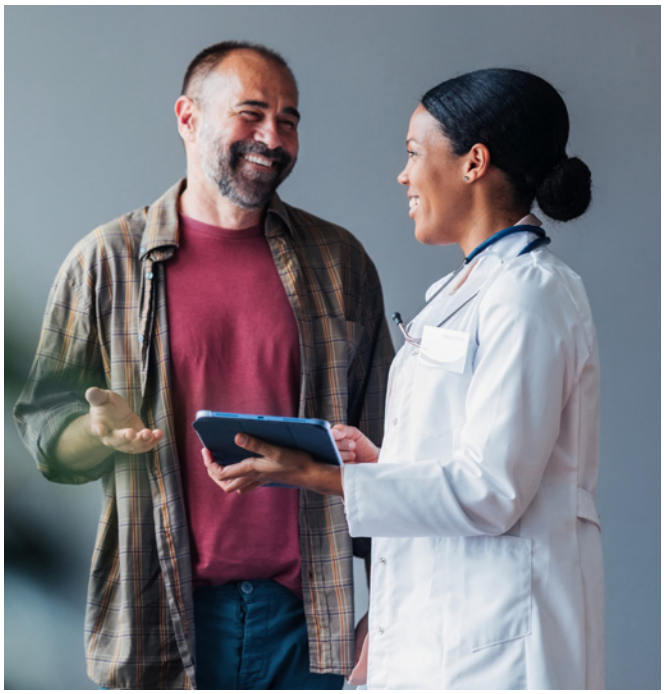
Many people put loved ones first, even at the expense of their own health. Remind them that controlling blood pressure is the best way to stay strong and present for family, friends, pets, and community.

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 people 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.livetothebeat.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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