

Understanding High Blood Pressure

Getting Started with Mental Health Therapy

Feed Your Gut Right

The Silent Rise: Why Colorectal Cancer is Increasing in Adults



Speak Up for Your Health

How to Advocate for Yourself in Care



You are the most important part of your healthcare team. Self-advocacy means understanding your health, clearly sharing your concerns, asking questions, and making sure you feel confident about your care decisions.

Before appointments, write down your symptoms, concerns, and questions. Bring an updated list of medications, past treatments, and any recent test results. It can also help to bring a trusted friend or family member to listen, take notes, or help you remember important details.

Don't hesitate to ask for clarification if something is unclear. You also have the right to seek a second opinion if you want more information about your diagnosis or treatment options.

Being an active participant in your care helps you make informed decisions, build stronger relationships with your providers, and receive care that supports your personal health goals. Your voice matters—and advocating for yourself is one of the most important steps you can take toward better health.

We're here to support you in making your health your top priority.



Here's How We Support Your Health

We believe healthcare should be personal, convenient, and cost-effective. That's why we built a system where your care team communicates, coordinates, and works together on your behalf. Whether you're scheduling a check-up, navigating benefits, or need support after hours, **we've got you covered.**

24-Hour Help Nurse

563-556-4357

800-325-7442

Call anytime—day or night—for trusted advice on symptoms, medications, and when to seek care.

Member Services

563-584-4885

866-821-1365

Have questions about your plan, benefits, or claims? We're here to help with friendly support.



My eLink

A secure online portal where you can view benefits, manage your ID card and pharmacy info, check claims, and send secure messages. **Sign up at mahealthplans.com.**

Health Management



Health Coaching

Our health coaches are real people here to support your wellness journey with personalized, sustainable guidance tailored to your goals.



Disease Management

Get support for managing diabetes and hypertension with personalized education, care guidelines, and regular check-ins from our dedicated nurse.



Case Management

Our nurses are here to guide you through complex conditions, answer questions, and be your advocate—helping you navigate the system with confidence.

If you are a member and feel that you would benefit from any of these programs, please **contact Member Services at 563-584-4885 or 866-821-1365.**

YOU HAVE US.

FEBRUARY IS

Heart Month



48% of U.S. adults have high blood pressure.



Only 25% ever get it under control.



High blood pressure linked to 660,000+ deaths (2023).



Understanding High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure, or hypertension, occurs when the force of blood pushing against your artery walls stays higher than it should. Blood pressure is measured with two numbers: systolic (the pressure when your heart beats) and diastolic (the pressure when your heart rests between beats).

Why it matters

High blood pressure is often called a “silent killer” because most people do not feel symptoms. Many adults have elevated readings without realizing it, which makes regular monitoring important.

When blood pressure stays high over time, it can damage blood vessels and organs. Serious complications may develop, including heart attack, stroke, heart failure, kidney disease, and vision problems. Preventing or controlling high blood pressure helps reduce the risk of these long-term health issues.

What counts as high

Blood pressure ranges fall into several categories:

Normal: Systolic below 120 and diastolic below 80 mmHg

Elevated: Systolic 120 to 129 and diastolic below 80 mmHg

Stage 1 Hypertension: Systolic 130 to 139 or diastolic 80 to 89 mmHg

Stage 2 Hypertension: Systolic 140 or higher, or diastolic 90 or higher

A single high number, either systolic or diastolic, may be enough for a diagnosis depending on a person’s age and overall health.

What causes it

For many people, there is no clear cause. This is known as primary or essential hypertension. Age, family history, and genetics play a role, but lifestyle factors also have a significant impact.

Common contributors include lack of physical activity, excess sodium in the diet, being overweight, tobacco use, and frequent alcohol consumption. Some medical conditions, such as kidney disease or hormonal disorders, can lead to secondary hypertension. Certain medications may also raise blood pressure.

Why it is often silent

Most people with high blood pressure feel completely normal. Years can pass without any clue that something is wrong. In rare cases, extremely high blood pressure may cause dizziness, chest pain, vision problems, swelling, shortness of breath, or signs of stroke. These require immediate medical care.

How to manage and reduce risk

Regular blood pressure checks are one of the most effective ways to protect your health. A healthcare professional can help interpret readings and determine whether treatment is needed.

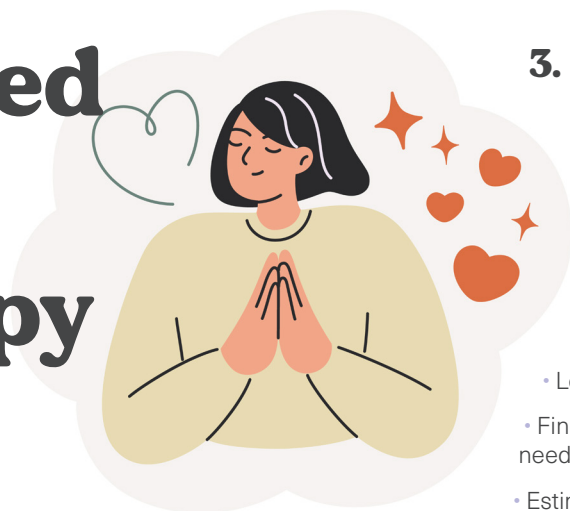
Healthy habits play a major role in prevention and management. Eating a balanced diet, limiting sodium, staying active, reaching or maintaining a healthy weight, avoiding tobacco, and limiting alcohol can all help lower blood pressure. When lifestyle changes are not enough, medications may be prescribed to keep it under control.

With regular monitoring and the right care plan, most people with high blood pressure can live healthy, active lives.

Source: www.heart.org

Your *heart* works for you every moment.
Let's take care of it.

Getting Started with Mental Health Therapy



Simple Steps to Begin Your Journey!

Seeking support for your mental health is a strong and positive step—but it can feel overwhelming if you're not sure where to begin. Many people hesitate because they're unsure what therapy involves or worry about finding the right provider. The good news is starting is often easier than you think. Therapy is simply a conversation with a trained professional who's there to support you and help you understand your feelings. With the right guidance and resources, you can take your first step with confidence.

1. Recognize That You're Not Alone

Many people experience stress, anxiety, or emotional challenges at some point in their lives. Therapy is a common and effective

way to work through those feelings. Reaching out shows strength and can help you build skills to navigate daily life, relationships, and future challenges. Knowing that others have walked this path can make it feel a little less intimidating.

2. Identify What You Want Help With

You don't need a clear diagnosis to start therapy. Instead, think about what's been weighing on you: Are you feeling more anxious than usual? Struggling to balance responsibilities? Not feeling like yourself lately? Even a simple list of thoughts or concerns can help guide your sessions. Therapists are trained to help you sort through your emotions even if you're not sure where to start.

3. Contact Member Services Before You Schedule

Before making an appointment, call Member Services at 563-584-4885. Our team can help you:

- Understand which mental health services are covered under your plan
- Learn whether you need a referral
- Find in-network therapists who meet your needs
- Estimate any out-of-pocket costs, if applicable

This step ensures there are no surprises and helps you feel prepared.

4. Pick a Therapist Who Works for You

Finding the right therapist can make a big difference in how comfortable and supported you feel. Every therapist has their own approach—some are more structured, while others offer a space to talk freely. It's perfectly okay to ask questions during your first meeting or to try someone else if the match doesn't feel right. The goal is to find a provider who listens, understands your goals, and helps you feel at ease.



5. Prepare for Your First Appointment

Your first session is mostly about getting to know one another. The therapist may ask about your background, what brought you in, and what you hope to accomplish. You don't have to share everything right away—just what feels manageable. Many people feel relieved after taking this step, because it often feels more like a conversation than an interview.

6. Give Yourself Time to Adjust

Starting therapy can feel new or unfamiliar. It's okay if it takes a few sessions to feel comfortable. What matters most is taking that first step and finding support that helps you feel better.

Beginning therapy is a meaningful act of self-care, and you don't have to navigate it alone.

If you're considering speaking with a mental health professional, call Member Services first. Our team is here to guide you, answer questions, and help you access the care that fits your needs and your plan.

Source: <https://mhanational.org/resources/therapy/>

GOOD BODY MECHANICS FOR SAFE SNOW SHOVELING

Shoveling snow can be tough on your back and heart. Using proper body mechanics helps prevent injury and makes the task easier.

Warm up first.

Shoveling is cold work for your muscles and spine. Take a few minutes to stretch your back, shoulders, and legs before heading outside.

Gentle torso twists and hamstring stretches can help reduce the risk of strain.

Use your legs, not your back.

Always bend your knees and keep your back straight when lifting snow. Squat slightly and let your leg muscles do the work—not your lower back.

Take a strong stance.

Keep your feet shoulder-width apart for stability. This low, balanced stance makes lifting easier and safer.

Keep the shovel close.

Hold the shovel close to your body to reduce strain on your back. Avoid reaching too far

forward or overextending your arms.

Lift small amounts.

Don't overload the shovel. Lifting too much snow at once can cause back or shoulder injuries. Scoop manageable amounts instead.

Pay attention to your direction.

Point your feet in the direction you want to throw the snow and pivot with your legs rather than twisting your spine. This helps protect your back.

Push when you can.

If the snow isn't too heavy, try pushing it forward instead of lifting and tossing. It's less strenuous and easier on your joints.

Take breaks.

Shoveling is a workout! Pace yourself, take regular breaks, and stay hydrated. Listen to your body and stop if you feel pain or unusual strain.

Wear proper footwear.

Non-slip boots help prevent falls on icy surfaces. Good traction is just as important as proper lifting technique.

Know your limits.

If you have a history of back or heart issues, or if the snow is heavy and wet, consider asking for help, using a snow blower, or hiring a professional.



FEED YOUR GUT RIGHT



Why Diet and Fiber Matter for Digestive Health

Inside your body lives an entire community of microorganisms: trillions of bacteria, fungi, and other microbes that make up what's known as your gut microbiome. While the idea of harboring bacteria might sound unpleasant, most of these microbes are beneficial. They play a vital role in digestion, metabolism, and immunity, and research continues to show that **a healthy gut may help lower the risk of conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and mood disorders.**

How Your Gut Microbiome Works

Think of your gut as a bustling ecosystem. The “good” bacteria help break down parts of food your body can't digest on its own. In return, they produce substances like short-chain fatty acids that nourish the cells lining your intestines and support a strong immune barrier.

When your gut bacteria are balanced, they help protect against harmful microbes and inflammation. But when that balance is disrupted by factors such as frequent antibiotic use, illness, or poor diet, less friendly bacteria can thrive, sometimes leading to digestive issues and other health concerns.

The Power of Diet

What you eat each day has one of the biggest influences on your gut microbiome—possibly even more than your genetics. Studies show that people with the healthiest gut bacteria tend to eat minimally processed foods such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans, nuts, seeds, eggs, and fish. On the flip side, diets high in ultra-processed foods can promote the growth of bacteria linked to inflammation and disease.

EAT	LIMIT	AVOID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leafy Greens Cruciferous Vegetables Blueberries, Strawberries, Cherries, Apples, Oranges, and Pomegranate Quinoa, Oats, and Brown Rice Chia Seeds and Flaxseeds Walnuts and Almonds (unsalted) Salmon and Sardines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eggs (especially yolks) Tomatoes (if reactive) Bananas (ripe) Grapes, Pineapple, and Mango Whole Wheat Bread Brown Rice Pasta Peanut Butter (natural only) Dark Chocolate Coffee Cheese (Mozzarella and Ricotta) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processed and Red Meats Fried Foods Hydrogenated Oils and Margarine White Bread and White Rice Sugary Cereals and Pastries Soda and Energy Drinks Sweetened Teas and Juices Alcohol Ice Cream Full-Fat and Processed Cheese

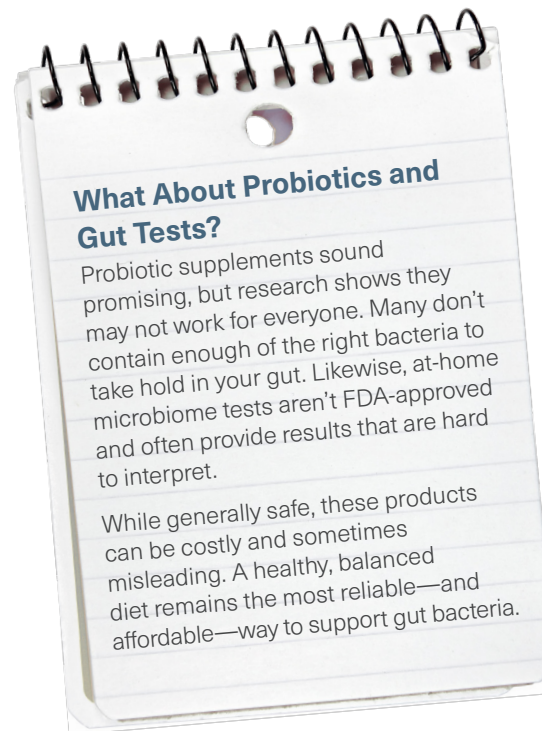
Fiber: Food for Your Microbes

Fiber is essential for gut health—but most people don't get enough. Because it isn't digested, fiber travels to the large intestine, where it feeds beneficial bacteria. As these microbes ferment fiber, they produce compounds that reduce inflammation, strengthen the gut lining, and support overall wellness.

Add more fiber to your day with:

- * Fruits and vegetables (especially those with skins and seeds)
- * Whole grains like oats, barley, and quinoa
- * Beans and lentils
- * Nuts and seeds

Aim to “eat the rainbow.” A variety of colorful plant foods helps maintain a diverse gut microbiome, linked to better long-term health.



Start with Small Changes

- * Choose fresh, whole foods more often
- * Add one new fiber-rich food each week
- * Stay hydrated to help fiber work properly
- * Check with your provider before cutting foods if you have ongoing digestive symptoms

Every gut is unique, but one thing is clear: a diet rich in fiber and whole foods is one of the best ways to keep your gut—and the rest of your body—healthy.

Source: <https://www.mayo.org>

Homestyle Chicken Noodle Soup

Serves 6



Nutrition

Calories: 282
Total Fat: 5 g
Saturated Fat: 1 g
Cholesterol: 73 mg
Dietary Fiber: 3 g
Total Sugars: 4 g
Protein: 30 g

Ingredients

- 2 tsp olive oil
- 3 medium carrots, thinly sliced
- 2 medium ribs of celery, leaves discarded, thinly sliced
- 1 small onion, diced
- 4 c fat-free, low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 1/2 lbs boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cut into bite-size pieces
- 3 c water
- 3 tbsp fresh Italian parsley, minced
- 1/2 tsp dried thyme, crumbled
- 1/4 tsp salt
- 1/4 tsp black pepper, coarsely ground
- 6 oz dried no-yolk noodles

Directions

Heat the oil in the pressure cooker on sauté. Cook the carrots, celery, and onion for 3 minutes, or until tender, stirring frequently. Stir in the broth, chicken, water, parsley, thyme, salt, and pepper.

Secure the lid. Cook on high pressure for 12 minutes. Allow the pressure to release naturally for 10 minutes, then quickly release any remaining pressure. Remove the lid.

Set the pressure cooker to sauté. Heat until the soup comes to a simmer. Stir in the noodles. Cook for 8 to 10 minutes, or until the noodles are tender, stirring frequently.

A bowl of chicken noodle soup always equals comfort. The vegetables add nutrition and an aromatic flavor. This soup can be prepared at a moment's notice and turns mealtime into a warm and satisfying experience.

Recipe Source: <https://recipes.heart.org/en/recipes/chicken-noodle-soup>

The Silent Rise: Why **COLORECTAL CANCER** is Increasing in Adults

Colorectal cancer was once considered a disease that mainly affected older adults—but that's changing.

Over the last two decades, doctors have seen a steady rise in colorectal cancer among people under 50.

While researchers are still studying why this trend is occurring, lifestyle factors such as diet, weight, and physical activity may play a role.

The good news? Colorectal cancer is highly preventable and treatable when caught early. That's why updated national guidelines now recommend starting regular screening at age 45 instead of 50. Screening can find precancerous growths, called polyps, before they turn into cancer—or detect cancer early, when treatment is most effective.

If you're 45 or older, talk with your provider about which screening option is right for you. Whether it's a colonoscopy or an at-home stool-based test, the best screening is the one that gets done.

Don't wait for symptoms—early detection saves lives.

150k

Each year, about 150,000 Americans are diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

90%

With early detection, colorectal cancer has a 90% survival rate.

1 in 3

About 33% of eligible adults are not getting screened.

Source: <https://colorectalcaner.org/screening-prevention>



FAQs about colorectal cancer screening

Is colorectal cancer preventable with screening?

Yes. Screening can find polyps before they turn into cancer and detect cancer early, when treatment works best. Increased screening has contributed to lower colorectal cancer rates in older adults.

Do I need to get screened for colorectal cancer?

Yes. Adults at average risk should begin screening at age 45. If you have risk factors such as family history, certain medical conditions, or lifestyle factors, your provider may recommend starting earlier.

When should I get screened?

Most people should start at 45. Start earlier if you: Have symptoms; Have a family history of colorectal cancer or polyps (typically age 40, or 10 years before the youngest case); Have certain genetic conditions; Have a personal history of cancer or chronic bowel disease. Talk with your provider to determine the right timing for you.

What are symptoms of colorectal cancer?

Symptoms can include changes in bowel habits, abdominal pain, rectal bleeding, or fatigue. These can be caused by many conditions, so any new symptoms should be evaluated promptly. Don't wait—early detection saves lives.

How can I convince someone to get screened?

Start by asking if they've considered screening and understand what concerns may be holding them back. Offer support, share why screening matters, and consider leading by example by getting screened yourself.

What should I do if I still have questions?

Talk with your healthcare provider about screening options, timing, and any concerns you may have.

Building Health Beyond the Doctor's Office



Social Determinants of Health

- Healthcare Access & Quality
- Neighborhood & Built Environ.
- Social & Community Context
- Economic Stability
- Education Access & Quality

Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) are the conditions in which you live, work, and play. They shape daily life, public policies, and social norms, and play a key role in your health, well-being, and quality of life. Examples include:

- Safe housing, transportation, and neighborhoods
- Racism, discrimination, and violence
- Education, job opportunities, and income
- Access to healthy foods and exercise options
- Polluted air and water
- Language and literacy skills



To address health disparities, we created a 2-minute questionnaire to better understand your well-being and provide improved care.

Please scan this code or visit the link below to fill yours out <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MAHP-SDOHsurvey>.

An Español version is available.



FOR YOUR REFERENCE

Information related to MAHP's quality improvement plan, case management, disease management, member rights, communications, appeals process, after-hours assistance, accreditation/awards, and privacy/confidentiality may be viewed at: www.mahealthplans.com. Persons without access to the internet may request paper copies by contacting MAHP at 563-556-8070 or 1-800-747-8900. Please ask to speak with a member of the QI team for assistance.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH INSURANCE?

Call us at 563-584-4885 or email memberservices@mahealthcare.com

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