high blood pressure: keeping hypertension in check

The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute defines high blood pressure, also known as hypertension, as blood pressure that remains chronically elevated over time. High blood pressure is dangerous because it makes the heart work too hard. High blood pressure increases the risk for heart disease and stroke, and can also lead to other problems, such as heart failure, kidney disease, and blindness.

Understanding your blood pressure
Your blood pressure reading is made up of two numbers:

- The first number is your systolic pressure, which measures the pressure in your arteries when the heart beats.
- The second number is your diastolic pressure, which measures the pressure in your arteries between beats.

Blood pressure values
The Mayo Clinic Web site states that your blood pressure is “normal if it’s below 120/80” but that “some data indicate that 115/75 should be the gold standard.”

The Mayo Clinic defines stage 1 hypertension as 140/90 to 159/99. Stage 2 hypertension, the most severe level, is considered to be 160/100 or higher.

Causes of high blood pressure
A number of environmental factors are known to cause hypertension, including salt intake, obesity, stress, and alcohol and drug intake. A sedentary lifestyle, low potassium and calcium intake, sleep apnea and resistance to insulin may also cause your blood pressure to rise.

Addressing high blood pressure
WebMD, an online provider of health information, states that all patients with blood pressure readings greater than 120/80 should be encouraged to make lifestyle modifications, such as eating healthier, quitting smoking, and getting more exercise. If you have blood pressure of 120/90, your doctor may recommend treatment with medication.

Adults are encouraged to have their blood pressure checked regularly. Be sure to call your doctor if you have any questions about your blood pressure or show any symptoms of high blood pressure such as sudden, severe headache or chest pain.