

# Heart Health



# High Blood Pressure Basics

About a third of all American adults are dealing with high blood pressure.

This serious health problem, dubbed hypertension by medical professionals, often doesn't have any noticeable symptoms. Some people with high blood pressure aren't even aware of it, putting themselves at higher risk of stroke or heart disease — two of the leading causes of death in the U.S., according to the CDC.

## DIAGNOSIS

Doctors will take two readings when you have your blood pressure checked. Systolic blood pressure is the upper number, and this figure indicates the pressure inside your blood vessels as your heart beats. The lower number, on the other hand, is the diastolic pressure, which in turn measures the vessel pressure when the heart is at rest between beats. The normal range for blood pressure is 120/80, with a measurement of 140/90 and above considered high blood pressure.

## WHAT CAUSES IT?

Unfortunately, the causes of high blood pressure are sometimes unclear. Hypertension typically develops slowly over a long period of time. It can be influenced by some lifestyle choices, particularly eating an unhealthy diet, using tobacco products and lack of exercise. Age and being overweight are



© ADOBE STOCK

also risk factors, but unseen things like genetics sometimes play a role. Secondary hypertension, a related condition, can be caused by kidney or thyroid problems, genetic defects, or sometimes medications meant to help with other issues. The secondary kind of hypertension has a more sud-

den onset, and may also lead to much higher blood pressure readings than primary hypertension.

## TREATMENT OPTIONS

High blood pressure isn't always preventable. Still, changes in our daily lifestyles can reduce the risk and help

with managing this dangerous health condition. Switch to a diet that is low in trans and saturated fats, dietary cholesterol and salt. Eating more vegetables and fruit, fiber and whole grains has a direct impact on heart health, while also helping you maintain a healthier weight. Get more

exercise. For most, that means at least a half hour per day of walking, biking, running, swimming, yoga or hiking. Ease into these new activities if you haven't been regularly exercising lately. Take shorter walks at first, with lots of stretching, and make sure your exercises are low-impact.

# Stress Management Techniques

Chronic stress can have a physical impact, particularly on our hearts.

The body reacts to stressors by releasing adrenaline which then causes both our heart rate and our breathing to quicken. Blood pressure increases like those aren't a concern if they only occasionally happen.

Continued high blood pressure from stress over a period of days, weeks or longer can begin to damage artery walls, while weakening our immune systems. Chronic stress is also known to lead to poor eating habits, less sleep and exercise, and increased intake of alcohol. These symptoms, in turn, are linked with more instances of heart disease.

## HOW TO MANAGE

Unfortunately, researchers have yet to develop medications to help us deal with stress. We have to create personalized approaches to identify and manage the situations that make us feel pressured. Plan ahead to reduce them, or completely avoid these issues. If stress can't be properly managed, there's a huge risk that worry, anger and depression will take hold. You may find it harder to focus, and the overstressed tend to display less patience. Mistakes or conflict with others may follow, only making things worse.

## IMPACTS ON OUR BODY

Physical symptoms are



© ADOBE STOCK

closely related to chronic stress, including headaches, an upset stomach, fluctuations with your weight, back pain and generally tense muscles. The worst of these symptoms puts additional stress on your heart and vessel systems. Doctors recommend stress-releasing exercise and tech-

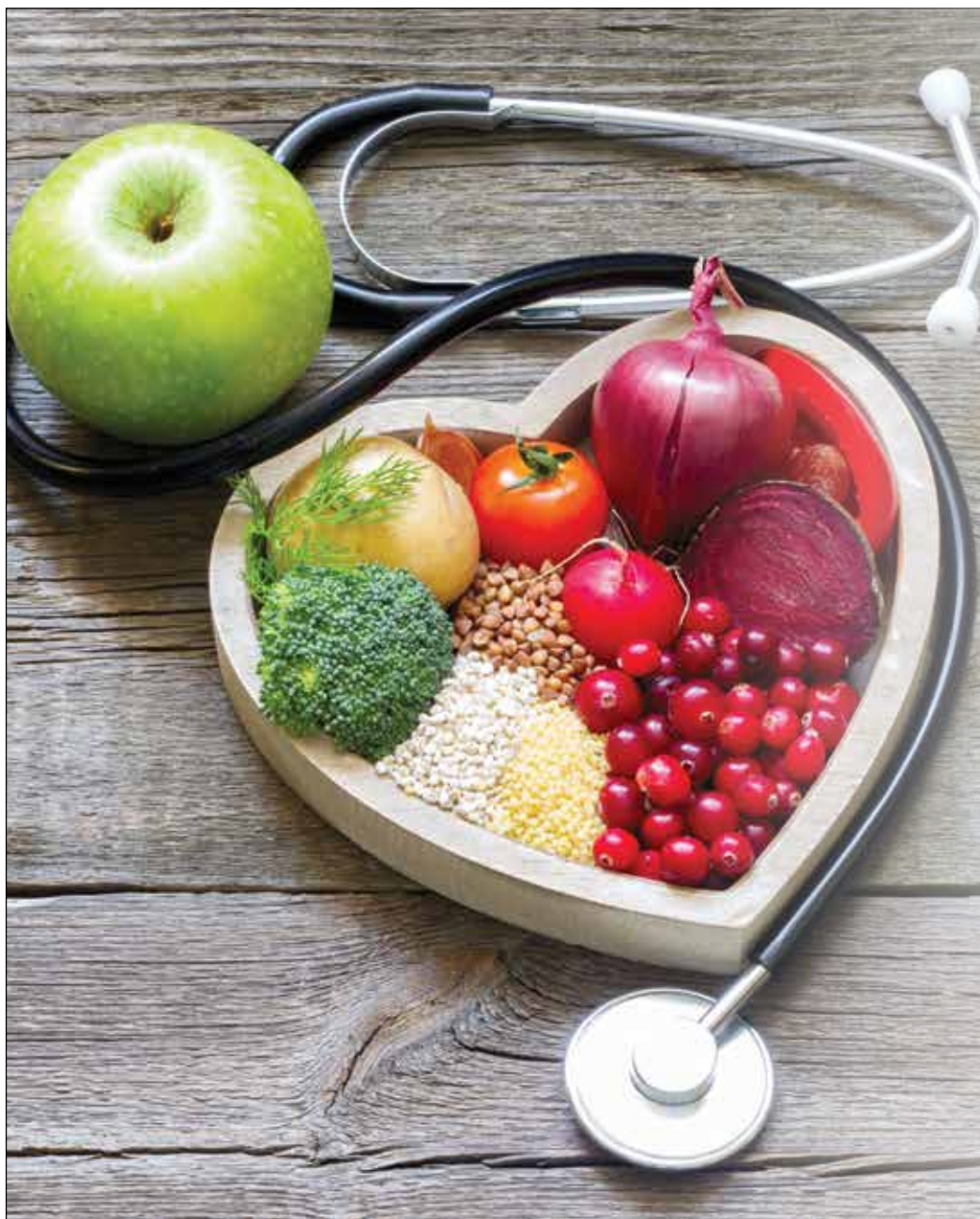
niques that encourage relaxation. Try yoga or meditation, listen to calming sounds or music, or take a break for a friendly conversation or stroll around the park. Step away from a situation when you start to feel pressured. Try to avoid triggers, if possible. When they can't be avoided, try to limit

the time you spend dealing with them.

## REACH OUT FOR HELP

Sometimes, these situations simply become too much to manage by ourselves. Or unrelated problems begin to accumulate. These might include a loved one's chronic issues or

our own, relationship issues with a partner or a child, continuing financial or career problems, or dealing with the aftermath of some form of trauma. Schedule a visit with a health care provider or counselor to discuss therapeutic options or other recommended treatment plans.



# The Importance of a Healthy Diet

Fad diets promise all manner of health benefits, touting themselves as easy solutions for obesity and a general sense of being unwell. Most don't work for long, if ever.

One thing that's more certain, however, is what poor diets can do. There's a direct correlation between what you eat and your heart health.

## RESEARCH BREAKTHROUGHS

As our understanding of the role diet plays has grown, so has the research behind creating a better way to eat. Experts at the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, for instance, have spent decades creating and modifying a single diet plan in order to address this critical need. The DASH diet, which stands for

Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension, underwent rigorous study before being unveiled. Repeated tests found that it helped reduce so-called "bad" cholesterol and blood pressure numbers, two key risk factors in the development of heart disease. Some saw lowered blood pressure within just a few weeks. Those who cut down on salt as well enjoyed even better results.

## RECOMMENDED APPROACHES

Whether on the official DASH diet plan or something similar, the concepts are universal in

heart-healthy eating. Eat nutrient-rich meals consisting of vegetables, whole grains, fish, fruit, low-fat dairy, poultry, nuts, beans and healthy oils. At the same time, limit your intake of fatty meat, sodium, sweets, full-fat dairy and sugary beverages. Experts recommend 6-8 servings of grains, 4-5 servings of vegetables, 4-5 servings of fruits, 2-3 servings of fat-free or low-fat dairy products. Only have six or fewer servings of meat, fish and poultry, 2-3 servings of fats and oils – and just 2,300 mg of sodium. Limit sweets to five servings or less per week.

## INSIDE THE VARYING NUMBERS

How many servings a person should eat within those healthy ranges depends on an array of factors, including activity level, age and gender. In general, base your diet on about 2,000 calories a day. But you may need to consume more calories if you are more active. As we age, we naturally need fewer calories. Men generally need more calories than women. Look for a helpful chart from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute at <https://rb.gy/gmf4f8> to figure out your personal caloric needs.

# Heart-Healthy Exercises

Adults should get at least two and a half hours of moderately intense aerobic exercise each week.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also recommends this activity take place in 10-minute intervals, or more. Focus on these specific areas to improve your heart health:

## AEROBIC EXERCISES

Cardio helps lower blood pressure, controls blood sugar and improves circulation. Moderate-intensity exercises include brisk walking, biking on a level terrain, gardening, leisurely swimming, and dancing. For those who often find themselves overscheduled, opt for a shorter but more vigorous routine. This would include jogging, swimming laps, biking over 10 miles per hour, hiking uphill and playing soccer. The general guidelines state that one minute of these types of vigorous activities equals roughly two minutes of moderate-intensity exercise. Just be sure to check with your doctor or personal health care professional before you get started.

## STRENGTH TRAINING

This doesn't have to mean heaving huge barbells. Lower-intensity resistance training can help lower bad cholesterol levels while reducing your risk of having a stroke or heart



© ADOBE STOCK

attack. These routines include pushups, squats and sit-ups, as well as lifting weights. The CDC recommends some sort of strength or resistance training at least twice a week. Besides toning muscles, these exercises also strengthen our bones and connective tissues, lower our risk of injury, and improve the general quality of

our lives. Just be sure to work all of the major muscle groups, not just your arms. That includes shoulders, chest, legs, hips, back and abs. Repetitions should be in sets of 8-12.

## FLEXIBILITY ROUTINES

Stretching can improve your balance and flexibility, while

reducing the chances of cramps, muscle pain and joint aches. The most popular flexibility-improving exercises include yoga, Pilates and tai chi. Many enroll in official classes or invest in online programs, but it's not required. A few timely stretching exercises in your own living room every other morning can yield

huge results. Stretch 3-5 times in a variety of poses during every session, going slowly until you can go no further without pain. Breathe normally during these stretches. Your motion should be smooth instead of jerky, in order to avoid injury. Hold the stretches for about 30 seconds each time.

# The Role of Sleep

Not getting enough shut-eye might have wider implications.

Anyone can struggle with a bout of poor sleep or even occasional insomnia. Stress, the inability to wind down, and eating or drinking too late at night will sometimes get in the way. But regularly missing out on the required amount of rest, or suffering from sleep apnea, has been linked to significant implications for your heart by the National Institutes of Health. If falling asleep — or remaining asleep — has become difficult or impossible, discuss the issue with your doctor. Sleep can have a huge impact on your heart health.

## WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Quality sleep is a key element of general physical and mental health, according to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. Deficient sleep patterns have obvious and immediate impacts, including attention problems, headaches and drowsiness. Your risk of accidents jumps, as does an eventual development of chronic illness. The institute recommends at least 7-8 hours of uninterrupted sleep per day. Regularly getting less can lead to high blood pressure and other potentially serious heart issues.

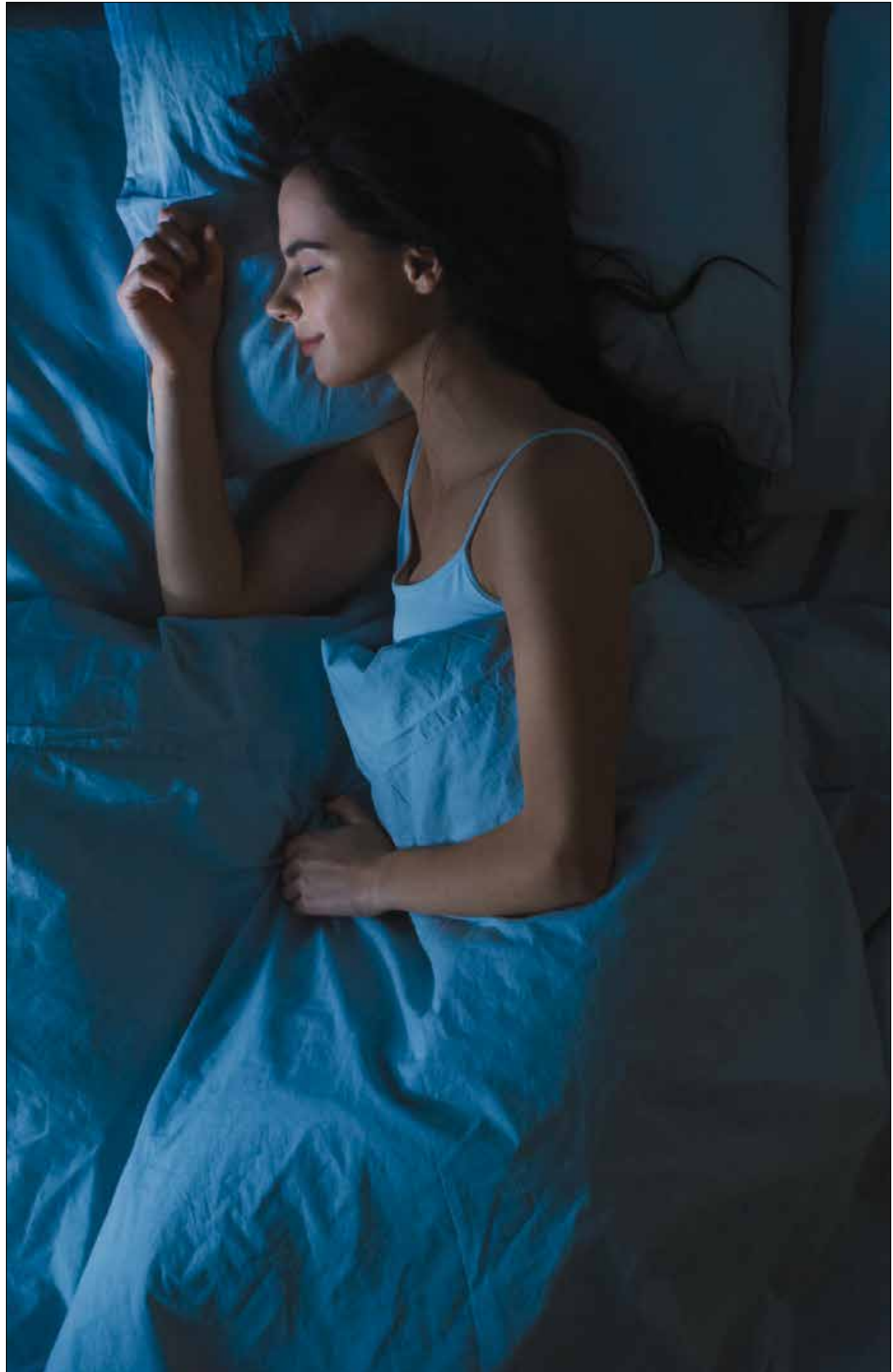
## RECOGNIZING THE PROBLEM

There's nothing to worry

about if you have a restless night here or there. But experts point to several warning signs if there is a larger problem with your sleep patterns. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine has outlined the most urgent issues. Talk to your doctor if you're experiencing unusual fatigue or sleepiness during daytime hours, consistently interrupted sleep or chronic snoring, consistent difficulty in concentration, irritability or headaches, and memory loss. A physician will do a physical examination and blood tests, but also discuss your work and life. In some cases, lifestyle choices may be recommended. If the problem persists, you may be enrolled in a sleep study.

## COMMON SLEEP ISSUE

Many people unknowingly suffer from sleep apnea, a condition that prevents us from entering the deep periods of rest that are essential for brain and body health, including the heart. In fact, the interruptions associated with sleep apnea have been directly linked to the development of cardiovascular issues. The National Institutes of Health reported that men who've been diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnea are 58% more likely to eventually develop potentially deadly coronary heart disease.



# Look for the Signs

The chances of dying of a heart attack have soared over the last few years, an especially troubling fact considering that heart disease was already a leading cause of death for Americans.

That's why it's never been more important to be aware of the signs associated with a heart attack. Monitor your own health, while looking for these warning signals among family, friends and acquaintances. Acting fast could save a life.

## SAVING A LIFE

As many as one in five heart attacks are considered "silent," meaning they happen without much or any notice. But the other 80% are accompanied by signs that should set off alarm bells. If you notice them, be ready to leap into action. Transport the person to the hospital or call for medical assistance. The sooner help arrives, the more likely they are to survive.

## WATCH FOR THIS

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that the most crucial warning sign is chest pain, usually on the left side or center. Heart attacks are usually associated with a feeling of squeez-



© ADOBE STOCK

ing, pressure or fullness. Pain might also radiate to other areas like the back, shoulders, arms, jaw, neck or upper torso. Be aware of any trouble breathing or shortness of breath, particularly when the person is not active. Nausea or vomiting may occur, along with a stomach-ache or heartburn. Another

worry is persistent dizziness, or feeling lightheaded and fatigued. Some heart attacks are accompanied by a feeling of feverishness like a cold sweat.

## WHAT TO DO

Of course, many of these symptoms point to other, less urgent issues. That's why it's so

crucial to understand and share your family history with a doctor. They'll also perform regular physical examinations to track your heart health journey. You may want to seek medical care even if you're experiencing new pain, having trouble breathing or feeling unusually tired. Be particularly cautious if more

than one of these symptoms is experienced. Call 911 right away in the event of an emergency. EMTs will begin treatment right away. Those who've had previous heart attacks are also reminded that they are not all the same. Symptoms may present quite differently the next time.

# The Dangers of Cholesterol

You've likely heard about the problem of high cholesterol, even if you don't quite understand it.

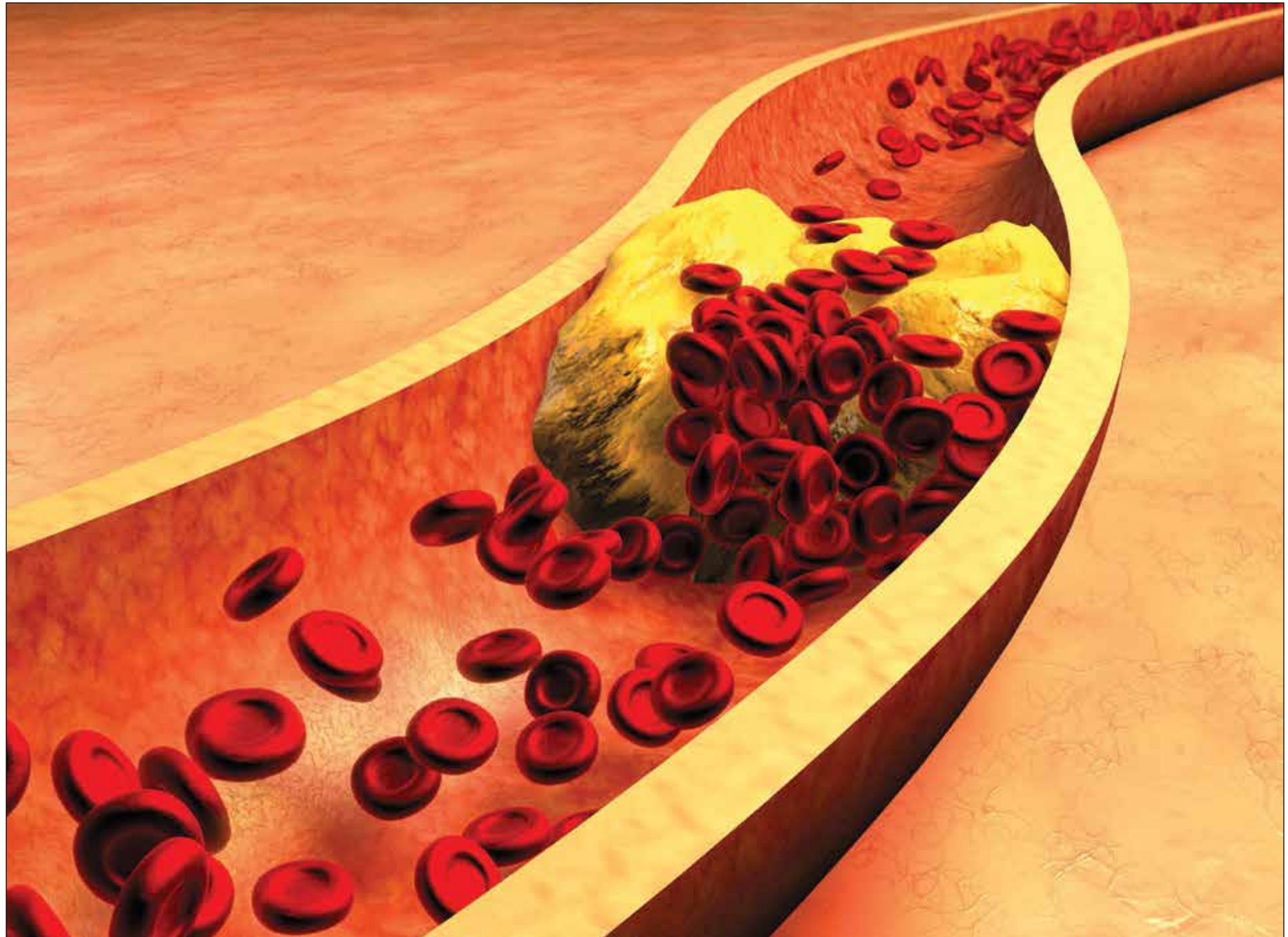
After all, it lurks silently in things we consume every day and there often is no way to know if your numbers are out of balance without a trip to the doctor.

You can easily have a huge problem without even knowing it. One of the main impacts of high cholesterol is blood pressure, which is a similarly silent danger to your health.

## DEFINING THE TERM

As many as one in six American adults has high cholesterol, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This fatty, waxy substance is produced naturally in the liver, and is needed to digest some foods and in the creation of hormones. It's found in our diets too, when we eat meat, butter, cheese and eggs, among other things.

Experts have more recently divided cholesterol into so-called "good" and "bad" categories. Low-density lipoproteins — referred to simply as LDL — are considered the bad



© ADOBE STOCK

kind, while high-density lipoproteins (HDL) are known as good cholesterol. When LDL reaches excessive levels in the body, it can begin to attach to blood vessel walls. This narrowing from plaque increases the risk of stroke and heart attacks. HDL, on the other hand, can absorb LDL and then carry it back to the liver where these proteins are then

flushed out of the body. In this way, LDL lowers your risk of heart disease.

## RISK FACTORS

Diets that are high in trans and saturated fats can contribute to high cholesterol, along with lack of exercise, tobacco use and excessive alcohol. Chronic health conditions like obesity and diabetes are also

risk factors. Talk to relatives to better understand family history, since that can play a role in the incidence of high cholesterol, as well.

## WHAT TO DO

Schedule a doctor's appointment where a series of tests will be performed. Those numbers will help you gauge your blood pressure and cho-

lesterol levels — both good and bad. If you are out of balance, changes in lifestyle will likely be recommended, and perhaps a prescription. Often, doctors recommend lowering the fat content in your diet, along with animal products and sugars. Increase high-fiber foods like whole grains and beans, along with vegetables, fruit and lean meat.