

There Is So Much Pressure: Your Blood Pressure and Pulse

When I go to the doctor's office, the nurse puts a black cuff around my arm. She has a small bulb in her hand, and she pumps air into the cuff. Then she slowly lets the air out. She watches a gauge that looks like a thermometer. When she is done, she writes some numbers down on my chart. Sometimes she tells me what the numbers are. Last time, she told me my blood pressure was "120 over 80."

What does all this mean, and why would she do that to me? Well, the nurse is checking my **blood pressure**. She is seeing how much force my blood is putting on the walls of my arteries. She wants to be sure my blood is moving correctly through my body. If the pressure is not right, that could mean I have serious health problems.

The first number lets the nurse know the pressure in the arteries during a contraction of the heart muscle. Normally, this number should be between 110 and 140. The second number lets the nurse know the pressure in the arteries when the heart muscle is relaxed. This number should be between 70 and 90.

When my father went to the doctor's office, his blood pressure was too high. The doctor was worried that he might have a heart attack or a stroke. The doctor gave my dad a prescription for some medicine. The medicine helped lower his blood pressure. He has to take the medicine every day and has to have his blood pressure checked on a regular basis.

The nurse does another job to check my heart, too. She puts her fingers on the inside of my wrist. She looks at her watch and counts in her head. What is she counting, and why would she be doing that?

The nurse is feeling my artery expanding and contracting in my wrist. This happens every time the left ventricle forces blood into the aorta. All the arteries in my body expand and contract. This is called my **pulse** or my **heart rate**.

A normal heart rate is between 65 and 75 beats in a minute, when you are resting. Your heart rate changes many times during the day. Your pulse increases when you are moving. It increases even more when you are exercising. Your pulse slows down when you are resting, and it becomes even slower when you are sleeping.

You can feel your own heart rate. If you cannot feel your pulse on your wrist, try putting two fingers on the side of your neck, right under your jaw. Push very gently and you should feel your pulse. Watch the clock and count how many times your heart beats in just one minute. Are you close to the normal heart rate? Remember, your heart rate changes depending on the activities you have been doing.