

Beta-Blockers

Beta-blockers are medicines that lessen the frequency and impact of nerve impulses on the heart and blood vessels. As a result, the heart beats slower and less forcefully. Blood pressure goes down, and the workload on the heart is reduced.

Beta-blockers are also called beta-adrenergic blocking agents, or beta-blocking agents.



How They're Used

Beta-blockers come in several forms including tablets, capsules, and liquid. They are taken one or more times a day, depending on the form and dosage of the medicine. Your doctor may want you to take a beta-blocker along with another type of medicine called a diuretic, which removes excess water and sodium from the body. Many people require two or more medicines to bring their blood pressure to a healthy level.

Side Effects

Beta-blockers can sometimes cause dizziness, trouble sleeping, tiredness, and weakness. Talk with your doctor if these symptoms are a problem or don't go away. Some less common effects are breathing problems; depression; swelling of ankles, feet, and/or lower legs; back or joint pain; and chest pain. Let your doctor know right away if you experience these side effects.

Special Warning for Patients With Diabetes

The use of beta-blockers has been known to mask the warning signs of low blood sugar. Be sure to monitor your blood sugar as recommended by your doctor.

Special Notes

Do not stop taking this medicine without first checking with your doctor. Your doctor may want you to reduce gradually the amount you are taking before stopping completely. Some conditions may become worse when the medicine is stopped suddenly, and the danger of heart attack is increased in some patients.

Treatment for high blood pressure may include controlling weight and limiting the amount of sodium (salt) in your diet. Follow your doctor's advice about weight and food.

Since many people with high blood pressure don't experience any symptoms of their condition, it's important to take medication exactly as prescribed and to see your doctor regularly, even if you feel fine.

Left untreated, high blood pressure can lead to serious heart problems, stroke, and kidney disease. While medicine won't cure high blood pressure, it does help control it. That's why you need to take it—possibly for the rest of your life—to manage your blood pressure.

Your doctor may want you to check your pulse rate before and after taking a beta-blocker. If your rate is slower than the one recommended, check with your doctor. If your pulse rate is too low, you may have circulation problems.

Some medicines you can buy without a prescription might *increase* your blood pressure. This is especially true for products intended for appetite control, asthma, colds, cough, hay fever, or sinus problems. Don't take these or any other medicines without discussing it with your doctor.

Tips for Taking This Medicine

- Take your beta-blocker medicine exactly as prescribed, as often as prescribed
- Before having any kind of surgery (including dental surgery) or emergency treatment, advise the doctor or dentist that you are taking a beta-blocker
- It's important not to miss a dose of beta-blocker medicine, especially if you're taking just one dose daily. Some conditions can get worse if this medicine isn't taken regularly. Ask your doctor ahead of time what to do if you should miss a dose
- Make sure you have enough medication on hand to last through weekends, holidays, or vacations
- Make sure your doctor knows about any allergies and any other medical problems you have, especially a history of allergies (asthma, eczema, hay fever, hives), bronchitis, or emphysema. Beta-blockers can worsen allergic reactions and may affect breathing
- Be sure to tell your doctor if you are pregnant or become pregnant while taking this or any other medicine. Beta-blockers taken during pregnancy have been associated with low blood sugar, breathing problems, lower heart rate, and low blood pressure in the newborn

Remember

Treatment for high blood pressure begins with lifestyle changes such as weight management; exercise; a low-salt, healthy diet; stopping smoking; and decreased alcohol intake. Even if you take medicine to help lower your blood pressure, you still need to make lifestyle changes recommended by your doctor.