Blood pressure is the force in which blood pushes against the arteries when traveling from the heart to other areas of the body. Stress, physical activity, sodium intake, certain medications, etc. are all things that can make blood pressure rise or fall. If blood pressure remains high for a long period of time (also known as hypertension), it can damage blood vessels and the heart. If blood pressure is too low, adequate blood and oxygen cannot reach other parts of the body. However, the most common concern is when blood pressure is too high.

Hypertension is also known as "the silent killer" because many people have high blood pressure and they don't even know it. Many times there are no symptoms that come with high blood pressure.   In fact, about one in three individuals in the United States have hypertension and about one in five Americans don't know they have it. To make matters even more concerning, high blood pressure contributes to heart disease and stroke, which are the leading causes of death in the U.S.

Both genetic and lifestyle factors increase the risk of developing hypertension. Unhealthy behaviors that often lead to high blood pressure include: smoking tobacco, consuming foods high in sodium and low in potassium, being physically inactive, being obese and drinking too much alcohol. Individuals, especially with these types of lifestyles, should have their blood pressure checked regularly. The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to have it checked. Many grocery stores, pharmacies, clinics, health departments and wellness fairs provide free blood pressure screenings.

Many people may know the numbers associated with their blood pressure. However, many people don't know what these numbers mean. Blood pressure is measured in millimeters of mercury using two numbers. For example, 120/80 mm/Hg is considered a normal blood pressure. The top number is called the systolic blood pressure. This is the amount of pressure on a person's blood vessels when the heart beats. The second number is called diastolic blood pressure. This number represents the amount of pressure on a person's blood vessels when the heart is at rest or in between beats. The diastolic pressure is very important in that it tells how much of a break the blood vessels get when the heart is in between beats. If the diastolic pressure is high, that means that the blood vessels are continuously under high pressure which can damage the vessels and cause vascular problems.

There are several steps you can take to keep your blood pressure under control. Usually, these steps include taking medications, reducing sodium intake, getting regular physical activity and quitting smoking. Lifestyle changes are difficult to stick to. Try changing one or two little things at a time to make the change more manageable. Over time, you should see your blood pressure and overall health improve.