



EMBRACING AGING

Know Your Health Numbers

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Numbers seem to overwhelm our lives with all the other things we must remember. There are health numbers that can extend your life and even save it. Numbers associated with cholesterol, triglycerides, blood pressure, blood sugar, and body mass index (BMI) are some of the major health numbers we need to know. Including regular visits to a health care provider, proper nutrition and physical activity in your lifestyle promotes these numbers and contributes to healthy aging throughout the lifespan.

CHOLESTEROL: < 200 mg/dL

The recommended target cholesterol level for men and women is less than 200 milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per deciliter (dL) of blood (MFMER, 2021).

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance your body produces naturally. Cholesterol is part of a healthy body but having too much of it in your blood can be a problem. There are two types of cholesterol: 1) **Low-density lipoprotein (LDL)** cholesterol is often referred to as “bad cholesterol” and 2) **High-density lipoprotein (HDL)** cholesterol is the “good cholesterol.” LDL cholesterol joins with fats and other substances to build up in the inner walls of your arteries, creating a thick, hard substance called **plaque**. When the arteries become clogged, the blood flow is reduced, and this increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. HDL cholesterol is “good” because it removes the “bad” LDL cholesterol (AHA, 2020).

Ways to increase HDL cholesterol:

- Eating a heart-healthy diet that includes a variety of fruits and vegetables, a variety of whole-grain foods, fat-free and low-fat milk products, lean meats, unsalted nuts/seeds, and nontropical vegetable oils like canola, corn, olive, or safflower oils.
- Getting enough physical activity
- Reaching and maintaining a healthy weight.
- Not smoking.
- Take your medications safely and talk with your medical provider about other treatment options.

High cholesterol has no symptoms, so many people don't know that their cholesterol is too high. A simple blood test can check cholesterol levels (CDC, 2022). Often, changing behaviors can help bring your numbers into line. If lifestyle changes alone don't improve your cholesterol levels, medication may be prescribed. Lifestyle changes include the following: eating a heart-healthy diet, becoming more physically active, quitting smoking, and losing weight. Some factors you cannot control such as family history, age, gender, and race (AHA, 2020). The blood test may be a “fasting” or “non-fasting” lipoprotein profile. Your doctor will tell you if you should fast before your test. (Fasting usually means not eating, drinking certain beverages, and taking medications 9 to 12 hours before the cholesterol

test) (AHA, 2022). All adults 20 or older should have their cholesterol and other traditional risk factors checked every four to six years if their risk remains low. People with cardiovascular disease, and those at elevated risk, may need their cholesterol and other risk factors assessed more often (AHA, 2022).

FASTING TRIGLYCERIDE LEVEL: < 150 mg/dL

Triglycerides are the most common type of fat in your body and store excess energy from your diet. They come from food, and your body also makes them. They can also build up within your artery walls and cause plaque (AHA, 2020). A high triglyceride level combined with high LDL “bad cholesterol” or low HDL “good cholesterol” is linked with fatty buildups within the artery walls, which increases the risk of heart attack and stroke (AHA, 2022).

Dietary and lifestyle changes help lower triglyceride levels.

- Exercise regularly
- Avoid sugar and refined carbohydrates
- Lose weight
- Choose healthier fats
- Limit how much alcohol you drink

Talk to your health care professional about your blood pressure and blood sugar to make sure they are in check or managed properly too.

Cholesterol and Triglyceride Levels Chart

	Desirable Level	Borderline High Risk	High Risk
Total Cholesterol	Below 200 mg/dL	200 – 239 mg/dL	240 mg/dL & above
LDL	100 -129 mg/dL	130 – 159 mg/dL	160 – 180 mg/dL (190 mg/dL+ is very high)
HDL	60 mg/dL & above	40 – 59 mg/dL, men 50 – 59 mg/dL, women	Below 40 mg/dL, men Below 50 mg/dL, women
Triglyceride	Below 150 mg/dL	150 – 199 mg/dL	200 – 499 mg/dL (500 mg/dL+ is very high)

Source: (MFMER, 2021)

BLOOD PRESSURE: < 120/80 mm Hg

The recommended target blood pressure for men and women is less than 120 mm Hg (millimeters of mercury) (AHA, 2020).



The only way you know if you have high blood pressure is to have your blood pressure tested. Understanding your results is key to controlling high blood pressure. Blood pressure is recorded as two numbers: 1) **Systolic blood pressure** (the first number) – indicates how much pressure your blood is exerting against your artery walls when the heart beats and 2) **Diastolic blood pressure** (the second number) – indicates how much pressure your blood is exerting against your artery walls while the heart is resting between beats (AHA, 2022).

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, usually has no symptoms, so the only way to know if you have it is to get your blood pressure measured. Your blood pressure changes throughout the day based on your activities. The higher your blood pressure levels, the more risk you have for other health problems, such as heart disease, heart attack, and stroke. High blood pressure can harm important organs such as your heart, brain, kidneys, and eyes.

You can prevent or manage high blood pressure by making lifestyle changes (CDC, 2021):

- Getting at least 150 minutes of physical activity each week (about 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week)
- Not smoking
- Eating a healthy diet, including limiting sodium (salt) and alcohol
- Keeping a healthy weight
- Managing stress

Blood Pressure Chart

Blood Pressure Category	SYSTOLIC mm Hg <i>(upper number)</i>	and/or	DIASTOLIC mm Hg <i>(lower number)</i>	What to do?
Normal	Less than 120	and	Less than 80	Stick with healthy habits.
Elevated	120 – 129	and	Less than 80	Adopt healthy habits.
High Blood Pressure (Hypertension) Stage 1	130 – 139	or	80 – 89	Adopt healthy habits. Doctor may prescribe medication.
High Blood Pressure (Hypertension) Stage 2	140 or higher	or	90 or higher	Adopt health habits. Doctor may prescribe multiple medications.
Hypertensive Crisis	Higher than 180	and/or	Higher than 120	Emergency care is needed immediately.

Source: (AHA, 2022; Hosier, Yelland, & Traywick, 2013)

FASTING BLOOD SUGAR: < 125 mg/dL

The recommended target blood pressure for men and women is less than 125 milligrams (mg) per decimeter (dL) (CDC, 2021).

Blood sugar or **glucose** is a type of sugar that travels through the bloodstream. It comes from carbohydrate foods and acts as a basic fuel for the body. The three main types of carbohydrates in food include sugars, starches, and fiber. Healthy carbohydrates include:

- Fiber-rich fruits and vegetables without added sugar
- Whole grains
- Low-fat dairy
- Beans and legumes
- Limit sugar

A fasting blood sugar test measures your blood sugar after an overnight fast (not eating). A fasting blood sugar of 99 mg/dL or lower is normal, 100 to 125 mg/dL indicates you have prediabetes, and 126 mg/dL or higher indicates you have diabetes.

Blood sugar levels change often during the day. When they drop below 70 mg/dL, this is called having low blood sugar. At this level, you need to take action to bring it back up. Low blood sugar is especially common in people with type 1 diabetes. Low blood sugar can result in a fast heartbeat, shaking, sweating, nervousness or anxiety, irritability or confusion, dizziness, and/or hunger. Severe low blood sugar is below 54 mg/dL. Blood sugar this low may make you faint (pass out). You can do one of the following if you are experiencing low blood sugar:

- Take four glucose tablets
- Drink four ounces of fruit juice
- Eat four pieces of hard candy
- Drink four ounces of regular soda, not diet soda

These foods increase blood sugar because they contain sugar that the body can easily absorb and helps individuals bring up their blood sugar level faster than most foods. Wait for 15 minutes and then check your blood sugar again. Do one of the above treatments again until your blood sugar is 70 mg/dL or above and eat a snack if your next meal is an hour or more away.

It's important to keep your blood sugar levels in your target range as much as possible to help prevent or delay long-term, serious health problems, such as heart disease, vision loss, and kidney disease. Stay in your target range can also improve your energy and mood.

BODY MASS INDEX (BMI): 18.5 – 24.9

Body Mass Index or **BMI** is the ratio of your weight in relation to your height and is an indicator of the amount of body fat for most people. Using BMI calculations, there are five weight categories: underweight, healthy weight, overweight, and obese. The normal BMI range for adults is 18.5 – 24.9 (AHA, 2021).

Your body is made up of water, fat, protein, carbohydrate and various vitamins and minerals. If you have too much fat, you're at a higher risk for such health problems as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and diabetes. That increases your risk for heart diseases and stroke. Obesity is now recognized as a major independent risk factor for heart disease. If you're overweight or obese, you can reduce your risk for heart disease by successfully losing weight and keeping it off (AHA, 2021).

To calculate your exact BMI value, you can also use a free online calculator:

https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm

BMI Chart

BMI	Rating	What to Do
Below 18.5	Underweight	Consult a healthcare provide. Low body mass can decrease the immune system and lead to illness.
18.5 – 24.9	Healthy weight	Maintain exercising and eating healthy.
25 – 29.9	Overweight	Find healthy ways to lower weight, including healthy eating and exercise.
30 or greater	Obesity	At serious risk for heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, gall bladder disease and some cancers; talk to health care provider and modify your lifestyle.

Source: (NIH, n.d.; Hosier, Yelland, & Traywick, 2013)

CONCLUSION:

Keep up with your health numbers by writing them down in a journal or medical log that is kept in a safe place. This will help you track your health patterns and set health goals.

Keeping up with your numbers is an important way to maintain a healthy lifestyle and optimal aging throughout the lifespan. Keeping up with your numbers can also help you reduce negative health effects such as obesity, disease of the hear, hypertension, diabetes, and cancers.

A Quick Guide to Keeping Up with Your Numbers

- **Cholesterol:** less than 200 mg/dL
- **Triglycerides:** less than 150 mg/dL
- **Blood Pressure:** less than 120/80 mm Hg
- **Blood Sugar:** less than 125 mg/dL
- **BMI:** 18 to 30 or greater

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