

Know Your Numbers

Over the years you have probably memorized a lot of numbers. Your home phone number, cell number, social security number, locker combination, home address, and maybe even your driver's license number or bank account. While all these numbers are important, so are a few more that can tell you how healthy you are or if you need treatment for certain medical conditions.

You should know what your blood pressure is because high blood pressure, which has no symptoms, can cause serious problems such as stroke, heart failure, heart attack or kidney failure. Normal blood pressure should be 120/80 or lower. A reading of 140/90 or above is a sign of high blood pressure. High blood pressure can be controlled by making healthy lifestyle choices and taking medications if necessary.

You can find out if your current weight is healthy by calculating your body mass index, or BMI, which is a measurement of body fat based on height and weight. A BMI of less than 18.5 is considered to be underweight; normal is 18.5 to 24.9; overweight is 25 to 29.9; and 30 or greater is obese. Obesity can increase the risk for certain cancers, depression, gallbladder and heart disease, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, stroke and type 2 diabetes. Even a modest weight loss of 10 percent of your current weight can help lower your risk for developing diseases associated with obesity.

Triglycerides are a kind of fat found in your blood that your body uses for energy. An elevated triglyceride level can increase the risk for heart disease. Normal triglyceride levels are: normal, less than 150 mg/dL; borderline-high, 150 to 199 mg/dL; high, 200 to 499 mg/dL; and very high, 500 mg/dL or higher. High triglycerides usually don't cause symptoms but can be lowered through diet and lifestyle changes.

Cholesterol is a waxy substance that is produced by the liver and found in certain foods. It is necessary to produce vitamin D and some hormones, build cell walls, and make bile salts to help in fat digestion. Total cholesterol should be less than 200 mg/dL. Cholesterol that is 200 to 239 mg/dL is borderline high; 240 mg/dL and above is considered high. Elevated cholesterol can lead to narrowing of the arteries due to plaque buildup and cause chest pain, heart attack or stroke. Cholesterol can be lowered through lifestyle changes and medications.

The sugar that the body uses for energy is called glucose. Elevated glucose levels can indicate diabetes, a chronic disease that occurs when the body fails to process sugar correctly. Normal results for a 75-gram oral glucose tolerance test would show a fasting level of 60 to 100 mg/dL, a one-hour level of less than 200 mg/dL, and a two-hour level of less than 140 mg/dL. A two-hour level of 140 to 200 mg/dL would indicate prediabetes, and a level over 200 mg/dL would be a sign of diabetes.

For more information about cholesterol, triglyceride or glucose tests, as well as healthy blood pressure and weight ranges, talk with your doctor.