

# Four Health Numbers You Should Know

Learn the four basic numbers you should know to assess your health.

You can rattle off your cell phone and Social Security numbers without a second thought. But can you recite the numbers that add up to good health: your blood pressure, cholesterol levels, blood sugar level and body mass index?

These four measurements are crucial indicators of your overall health, especially related to risk for heart attack and stroke. Unlike your family history, ethnicity and gender – which cannot be changed – these factors can be altered by the choices you make every day.

“Disease prevention is a numbers game that you can often control,” says Joline Heo, M.D., an internal medicine physician with Sutter East Bay Medical Foundation. “If your blood pressure, cholesterol, weight and other numbers are higher than normal, you can take steps to lower them—before your health becomes compromised.”

On the flip side, if your numbers are within a healthy range, you know you’re on track with your current healthy lifestyle habits.

## Silent Symptoms

Too-high blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar have few, if any, symptoms at first. The only way to know your levels is to measure them.

Talk with your doctor about health screenings you may need, especially if you have a family history of heart disease, stroke or diabetes. The American Heart Association recommends that you begin heart health screenings at age 20, and repeat every 4-6 years. If you have a family history of heart disease, or other specific risk factors, your doctor may recommend more frequent screening.

Once you have your numbers, you can take this easy online health risk assessment, created by Sutter Health network doctors. It will give you immediate results and recommendations about your own personal health risks.

Here are the four types of numbers everyone should know—and why.

## Blood Pressure

Your healthy target:

120/80 mm Hg or less

Why it matters: Your blood pressure is the force of your blood pushing against the walls of your arteries. If it's too high, your heart must work harder. Over time, high blood pressure can cause the heart to enlarge or weaken. This can lead to heart failure. High blood pressure can also narrow your arteries, which disrupts proper blood flow to your heart or brain and can trigger a heart attack or stroke.

## Blood Cholesterol

Your healthy target:

Total blood cholesterol lower than 200 mg/dL

LDL cholesterol less than 100 mg/dL

HDL cholesterol greater than 60 mg/dL

Triglycerides – should be under 150 mg/dL

Why it matters: Cholesterol is a fatty substance found in your body's cells. It helps your body make important vitamins and hormones. But too much cholesterol can lead to plaque buildup inside your blood vessels. This sticky substance causes your arteries to harden and narrow, which limits blood flow. These blockages can create a heart attack or, if located in the brain, a stroke.

## Fasting Blood Glucose

Your healthy target:

Up to 100 mg/dL

Levels of 100 to 125 mg/DL point to prediabetes

Anything above 125 mg/DL falls into the diabetic range

Why it matters: Your body breaks down food into glucose, which cells absorb for energy. When this process goes awry, glucose builds up in the blood. Extra sugar in your bloodstream is a sign of diabetes, a disease that can harm every organ in your body, while also damaging nerves and blood vessels.

## Body Mass Index

Your healthy target: 18.5 to 24.9

Why it matters: Your BMI is a weight-height calculation that can help determine if you're overweight or obese. "Excess body fat increases your risk for a wide range of health problems, including high blood pressure, heart disease, type 2 diabetes and sleep apnea," Dr. Heo says. A BMI over 30 is especially dangerous to your overall health.

## Numbers Too High? Here are Five Ways to Lower Them

Your doctor says one or more of your vital health numbers is too high. Now what?

Whether you need to lower your blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose or BMI, these five steps can get you back on track.

1. Aim for 30 minutes of moderate activity—such as walking, jogging, swimming, biking or dancing—five days per week.
2. Eat a heart-healthy diet. Fill your plate with plenty of fruits and vegetables, lean proteins, whole grains and low-fat dairy products.
3. Quit smoking.
4. Limit alcohol. If you drink alcohol, do so moderately. That means no more than one drink daily for women and no more than two drinks daily for men.
5. Ask about medications. In addition to making lifestyle changes, taking certain medications can provide an extra boost to bring your numbers within the healthy range. Talk with your doctor to learn if your situation warrants medications to bring your numbers into balance.



American Heart Association.

## 10 ways to improve your heart health

**1** Balance calories eaten with physical activity.



**3** Choose whole grains.

**2** Reach for a variety of fruits and vegetables.



**4** Include healthy protein sources, mostly plants and seafood.

**5** Use liquid non-tropical plant oils.



**6** Choose minimally processed foods.

**7** Subtract added sugars.



**8** Cut down on salt.



**9** Limit alcohol.



**10** Do all this wherever you eat!



Need more food for thought? Go to [www.heart.org/eatsmart](http://www.heart.org/eatsmart)