



GENERAL WELLNESS

FOUR NUMBERS AT THE HEART OF GOOD HEALTH

— By Your Health Blog

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Healthy living is a popular topic—but what does it actually mean to be in good health?

Too often, we take a passive approach to our health, waiting for problems to arise before seeking medical care. Good health can't be judged solely by external factors.

To stay on top of your overall health, it's important to know your numbers—and no, we don't mean hopping on the scale every morning. Measurements like weight can fluctuate throughout the day and aren't the best indicator of true physical well-being (translation: a healthy weight doesn't automatically equate to good health).

In addition to maintaining a healthy weight, we also recommend routinely monitoring more long-term numbers like your cholesterol, blood sugar and blood pressure.

"Maintaining good cholesterol and blood pressure levels, along with a healthy weight, are some of the most important ways anyone can reduce their risk of heart attack, stroke and so many other medical problems," says Methodist Medical Group primary care physician Christopher D. Wright, MD.



The Four Numbers to Measure Your Heart Health

Thankfully, learning your numbers is as easy as a visit to your primary care provider, or PCP, who can help you measure, understand and reduce your risk for a wide range of health problems.

Take a vital step toward better long-term health by measuring what matters most:

1. Total Cholesterol

Cholesterol actually does some good work for our bodies. However, your liver typically produces all the cholesterol you need—which means extra cholesterol floating around our bloodstream (like the kind found in processed foods we eat) can lead to problems. Too much cholesterol causes fatty deposits (a.k.a. plaque) to build up in our arteries, making it harder for blood to flow and increasing our risk for heart disease, heart attack and stroke.

You can learn, and learn to understand, all your cholesterol levels—including LDL, HDL and triglycerides—through a simple blood test and conversation with your PCP.

Healthy target: total cholesterol less than 200 mg/dL is a good start, but individual risk factors vary so it is worth discussing individual numbers with your PCP.

2. Blood Pressure

This one's a biggie. Put simply, "blood pressure" is the amount of force, or pressure, your blood applies to the walls of your arteries as it's pumped throughout your body. The top number, or systolic pressure, shows the pressure in your arteries when your heart beats, while the bottom number, or diastolic blood pressure, measures pressure in your arteries when your heart rests between beats.

- Normal blood pressure: Lower than 120/80
- Elevated blood pressure: Between 120-129/80
- High blood pressure, stage 1: Between 130-139/80-90
- High blood pressure, stage 2: 140/90 or higher

High blood pressure means your heart is forced to work harder, weakening it over time. High blood pressure also causes your arteries to narrow and harden, limiting the flow of blood (a major risk factor for stroke, among other things).

"While it seldom causes obvious symptoms, we call high blood pressure 'the silent killer' because it quietly damages your organs over time," said Oluwaseun Akinseye, MD, medical director of cardiovascular services at Methodist University Hospital.

Annual blood pressure screenings can help you track changes in your numbers and set realistic, healthy goals. For example, if your top number is 130, taking steps to reduce it by just a few points can have significant positive effects on your long-term health.

Healthy target: blood pressure less than 120/80 mmHg

3. Fasting Blood Sugar

High blood sugar, also known as hyperglycemia, can damage the nerves and blood vessels that control your heart over time. High blood sugar is also a leading cause of type 2 diabetes, which is one of the primary health concerns facing adults in the Mid-South.

Fasting (a.k.a. not eating and drinking only water) for 8-12 hours prior to your health screening is helpful for an accurate blood sugar reading.

Healthy target: blood sugar below 100 mg/dL

4. BMI (Body Mass Index)

The body mass index, or BMI, is a measure that compares our height and weight to determine a healthy weight range for our bodies. While weight isn't the deciding factor for good health, it certainly plays a part. Being overweight—especially around the midsection—increases our risk of heart disease. Extra weight also has a bearing on blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar, which means maintaining a healthy weight is a critical factor affecting all our "good health" numbers.

While shedding pounds can be challenging, even a small weight loss—just 3-5% of our total body weight—can mean big payoffs toward lowering our other numbers. And right now, Methodist is inviting Mid-Southerners of all shapes and sizes to join the Healthier 901 movement and lose 1,000,000 pounds across our region over the next three years.

Healthy target: BMI between 18.5 and 25

If you learn that your numbers are high, your PCP can help you identify healthy lifestyle changes to bring them down.

Join The Movement!

You can also take advantage of free community-based resources, like [Healthier 901](#), to connect with tools, resources and like-minded community members working toward a healthier (and higher!) quality of life. When in doubt, remember—little lifestyle changes today lead to big health benefits over time.

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