

Know Your Numbers and Save Your Life

Dec. 1, 2009

By Syndicated Columnist Cathy Harris

Since experts have estimated that this is the first generation that will not outlive their parents, all of us need to pay close attention to this article! We are all obsessed with numbers in our lives - our age, our weight, our height, etc. But there are some numbers that can literally save your life, only if you know what they are and what they really mean.

Many people are not comfortable with their doctors; therefore, they should find a doctor they feel comfortable with to discuss all of these critical numbers.

For people who don't have health insurance, there are free clinics throughout their communities. However, no matter how sick people get, many will be ashamed of their situations and will not seek out these clinics.

For others emergency rooms at hospitals will be their only options. Remember you might have to wait if you go to emergency rooms at hospitals for treatment because medical emergencies do come first. However, these facilities are not supposed to turn you away. They will see you and just bill you later. If it is at all possible, try to stay away from emergency rooms late at night or early in the morning when they are understaffed and they have a greater chance of making mistakes.

For those who are uninsured, it is now more important than ever to live a natural and healthy lifestyle. Use preventative measures such as regulating your weight by exercising and eating healthy. If you are sickly and need to keep health insurance, you might be able to qualify for COBRA for 18 months after termination from your old job. You only have to pay 35% for 9 months.

If you think you might be out of work for a few months, there are short term health insurance policies such as www.ehealthinsurance.com. However, keep in mind in order to keep down the monthly amount that you have to pay for these short term policies; you might be required to pay big deductibles. Many times these policies are only worth it if you have some type of ongoing illness. So do your research!

Other steps you can take if you don't have health insurance:

- Ask your doctor about reduced fees and treatment. Ask about a healthcare discount card and buy generic medication.
- Do not smoke! By not smoking you increase your chances of being approved for another health insurance plan.
- Apply for Medicaid (<http://www.cms.hhs.gov/home/medicaid.asp>) which is for low-income families.

- Apply for Medicare if you are over age 65. You can contact your local Social Security office www.SSA.gov or the main office at 1-800-772-1213.
- Use alternative treatments like acupuncture and herbal remedies which are cheaper than expensive prescriptions or medical treatments and can provide similar results.
- Get health insurance through your spouse or partner.
- Take a lower paying job for better health benefits.

When you enter a doctor's office the doctor's assistants will take your "temperature" and "blood pressure" but you will be amazed at how many people will walk out of these offices without knowing these numbers.

There is a reason that your doctor takes this information every time you go into their offices. They need to know if you have a fever, something that occurs when your body is fighting an infection, and it will help the doctor diagnose any type of condition you try to describe to them.

They take your blood pressure to see if it is high which is 130/80 if you have diabetes -- otherwise 140/90. If your bottom number is over 100, then you are about to have a stroke and might need to be hospitalized or the doctor might recommend you go on medication right away. If your blood pressure is not through the roof, in many cases, instead of getting on medication you can tell the doctor to give you a couple of months to see if you can lower your blood pressure on your own through diet and exercise. But this is not a number that you want to play around with! I have seen many people in their late 20s or early 30s that have ended up deceased from a stroke or ended up in wheelchairs, going back and forth to rehab centers. The numbers are alarming at how many young people meet this fate!

Many times in order to diagnose a condition a doctor will run further tests such as: 1) taking a "urinalysis" or "blood test" from you. Sometimes they can look at these tests right away and give you the results or sometimes they might have to send the tests to a lab. If this is the case they will make an appointment for you to come back in a week or two. Meanwhile, many doctors will try to put you on some type of medication even without having your entire results. Remember many doctors are in bed with the pharmaceutical industry and their goals are to keep you on medication.

Not only do you have the right to know your numbers when you visit your doctors' office you can ask them for copies of the tests as well.

When you go to the doctor they will only be in your room with you for 2 to 5 minutes because they have other patients to see. Therefore, it is extremely important that you are ready to describe any symptoms or ask any questions up front! This is why it is important to write down questions before you go to the doctor so you can leave there with all your questions answered. Once they leave the room they might send in an aide or assistant but you might not have another chance to ask your question. So be ready!

If your doctor intimidates you then you have the option to take others who can ask questions with you such as family members or friends who can act as a “healthcare advocate.”

If you change doctors you can get a copy of your medical records or sign a release to have the medical records released or sent directly to your new doctor. This is extremely important if you are changing cities.

Some of your recommended yearly exams include:

- Get a complete body physical (from head to toe)
- Get a head to toe skin exam by dermatologist
- Go to dentist every 6 months (Get x-rays for oral cancer. Over 70% of the population has periodontal gum disease).
- Get pap smear by age 21 or sooner if sexually active
- Get a mammogram by age 35-40
- Get prostate exam by age 40
- Get colonoscopy at age 50
- Get a hearing test at age 65

If you have family histories get all exams sooner.

Some of the tests you need to take so you will know your numbers are:

1. Blood Glucose aka Blood Sugar (for Diabetes)

Blood glucose tests are done to: 1) Check for diabetes, 2) Monitor treatment of diabetes, 3) Check for diabetes that occurs during pregnancy, and 4) Determine if an abnormally low blood sugar level hypoglycemia is present.

If you have type 2 diabetes, there are two numbers you need to watch: 1) your blood sugar, and 2) your hemoglobin A1c levels.

Numbers you need to watch out for:

- A normal fasting blood sugar is less than 100 mg/dL.
- Prediabetes has a fasting blood sugar of 100 to 125 mg/dL.
- You may have diabetes if your fasting blood sugar is 126 mg/dL or greater and you've gotten that result two or more times.

Several different types of blood glucose tests include:

- **Fasting blood sugar (FBS)** which measures blood glucose after you have not eaten for at least 8 hours. It often is the first test done to check for diabetes.
- **2-hour postprandial blood sugar** which measures blood glucose exactly 2 hours after you eat a meal.

- **Random blood sugar (RBS)** which measures blood glucose regardless of when you last ate. Several random measurements may be taken throughout the day. Random testing is useful because glucose levels in healthy people do not vary widely throughout the day. Blood glucose levels that vary widely may indicate a problem. This test is also called a casual blood glucose test.
- **Oral glucose tolerance test** is used to diagnose prediabetes and diabetes. An oral glucose tolerance test is a series of blood glucose measurements taken after you drink a sweet liquid that contains glucose. This test is commonly used to diagnose diabetes that occurs during pregnancy (gestational diabetes).

But because spot glucose checks can vary dramatically, A1c levels are a better measure of whether your diabetes is under control. Doctors like to see an A1c level of less than 7. But recent research has shown that when we're more aggressive with diabetics and get the number below 6, they actually have more problems. Aggressive management in a frail elderly person with a lot of medical problems may not be the best idea, like it may be in an otherwise healthy young person. It's important to talk to your doctor to discover what's best for you.

Normally, your blood glucose levels increase slightly after you eat. This increase causes your pancreas to release insulin so that your blood glucose levels do not get too high. Blood glucose levels that remain high over time can damage your eyes, kidneys, nerves, and blood vessels. This is why so many African Americans become blind, go on kidney dialysis or lose limbs to diabetes, especially if they also have high cholesterol or high blood pressure. Diabetes is the number one killer of African Americans!

2. High Blood Pressure aka Hypertension

A normal blood pressure is below 120/80. Pre-hypertension is 120 to 139 (systolic) and/or 80 to 89 (diastolic). "Hypertension" also known as "high blood pressure" is 140 or higher (systolic) and 90 or higher (diastolic) or 140/90.

Everyone should check their blood pressure early and check it often. To check your blood pressure you can go to a fire station for free, go to a drugstore and use a free automated blood pressure monitor or you can buy a kit to use at home. The home kits are as low as \$16 for a manual and \$29 for a digital.

If your blood pressure is greater than 130/80, then it is high if you are a diabetic. Many believe it is not high until it is greater than 140/90. In either case, bring this information to your doctor and take action. High blood pressure is a "silent killer." Hypertension is one of the leading causes of kidney failure which causes many people to get on dialysis. It also causes enlargement of the heart, accelerated atherosclerosis in your arteries, and sudden hemorrhages in the brain (stroke of the brain), all of which can have sudden death as their first symptom.

You can feel great right up until the moment you die from hypertension.

Having high blood pressure can cause you to age prematurely. Like smoking, it can take 10 years off your life. One of the best steps you can take to lower your blood pressure besides daily exercising and eating a healthy diet is to watch your salt intake. Try to use organic spices instead which can help boost your metabolism and immune system. Many people don't understand that at least 90% of all the sodium they receive in their diets comes from processed foods so if you cut these foods out of your diets, stop adding salt to your diets, you will automatically bring your blood pressure down.

3. Cholesterol

High cholesterol is also known as "hypercholesterolemia." Abnormal cholesterol levels such as high LDL cholesterol or low HDL cholesterol are a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. An unhealthy diet can cause high cholesterol. Sometimes high cholesterol runs in families. A low-cholesterol diet can help improve cholesterol levels. If the low-cholesterol diet does not work to lower bad cholesterol and increase good cholesterol, your doctor may prescribe medications.

A "Lipid Panel" is needed to read your cholesterol numbers. A lipid panel is a blood test that measures lipids-fats and fatty substances used as a source of energy in your body. To get good results make sure you go on a 12 hour fast (nothing but water) before the test.

Adults 20 years old and older should get a lipid profile every five years. Then after a certain age they need the lipid profile every year or every 6 months.

Cholesterol isn't all bad -- it's a type of fat that's actually a nutrient. But as you've probably heard, there's "good cholesterol" and "bad" cholesterol." When we measure cholesterol and blood fats, we're really talking about three different numbers: HDL, LDL, and triglycerides. They combine to give you a "lipid profile" score, but the three individual scores are most important.

Here are the numbers to strive for:

- **Total cholesterol:** Your total cholesterol should be 200 mg/dL or lower.
- **HDL (the "good cholesterol" or high-density lipoprotein):** The HDL should be of 50 mg/dL or higher, if you're a woman, or 40 mg/dL or higher, if you're a man. Cholesterol helps remove fat from the body by binding with it in the bloodstream and carrying it back to the liver for disposal. It is sometimes called "good cholesterol." A high level of HDL cholesterol may lower your chances of developing heart disease or stroke.
- **LDL (the "bad cholesterol" or low-density lipoprotein):** The LDL should be 100 or lower. If you have other major risk factors, like pre-existing cardiovascular disease or diabetes, your doctor may want your LDL closer to 70. Cholesterol carries mostly fat and only a small amount of protein from the liver to other parts

of the body. It is sometimes called "bad cholesterol." A high LDL cholesterol level may increase your chances of developing heart disease. LDL is the number most doctors and heart health programs focus on in particular. Every single point of LDL decrease makes a difference. If your LDL is at 140 and you get it down to 130, that's great, even if you haven't reached optimum levels yet.

- **Triglycerides less than 150 mg/dL:** Triglycerides are the main form of fat in the body. Triglycerides are a type of fat the body uses to store energy. Only small amounts are found in the blood. Having a high triglyceride level along with a high LDL cholesterol may increase your chances of having heart disease more than having only a high LDL cholesterol level. When you think of fat developing and being stored in your hips or belly, you're thinking of triglycerides. Consider these things: Triglyceride levels are checked after an overnight fast. Fat from a meal or other parts of the meal that get converted into triglycerides can artificially raise the triglyceride levels on the test.

The National Cholesterol Education Program sets guidelines for triglyceride levels:

- Normal triglycerides means there are less than 150 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL).
- Borderline high triglycerides = 150 to 199 mg/dL.
- High triglycerides = 200 to 499 mg/dL.
- Very high triglycerides = 500 mg/dL or higher.

According to Dr. G, Medical Examiner and the author of "*How Not to Die*", "Heart disease, particularly due to atherosclerotic plaque buildup (narrowed coronary arteries), and strokes are major causes of premature death. Cholesterol-lowering drugs are a major success story in modern medicine. They're inexpensive, well tolerated, and extremely effective. Take advantage of this great medical advance."

Other numbers to strive for are listed below. Remember some of the numbers and desirable ranges changes with age so have your doctor explain each after you take a Lipid Panel with a 12 hour fast:

- **Cholesterol** (Desirable range is lower than 200 mg/dL)
- **HDL (Good Cholesterol)** (Desirable range higher than 40 for men and 50 for women)
- **LDL (Bad Cholesterol)** (Desirable range is less than 100)
- **Triglycerides** (Desirable range less than 150)
- **High Blood Pressure** (Desirable range is less than 130/80)
- **Glucose for Diabetes** (Desirable range is 65-99) (Prediabetes is a fasting blood sugar of 100 to 125 mg/dL)
- **Iron (Hemoglobin)** (Desirable Range 11.7 - 15.5 & **(Hematocrit)** 35.0 - 45.0)
- **Potassium** (Desirable range is 3.5- 5.3)
- **Kidneys (Creatinine)** (Desirable range is 0.60 - 1.10)

- **Thyroid** (Desirable range is 0.40-4.50)

4. BMI – Body Mass Index

It is recommended that everyone should have a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 25 or less but don't get discouraged because for African Americans this number should be higher. The BMI is used to find out if a person is underweight, normal weight, overweight, or obese. BMI assesses height and weight; muscle mass is not a part of the equation. BMI is calculated by dividing a person's weight (in kilograms) by his or her height (in meters, squared). BMI can also be calculated by multiplying weight (in pounds) by 705, then dividing by height (in inches) twice.

5. Waist Size – The Connection to Heart Disease

A woman's waist size should be 35 and a man's waist size should be 40. Your waist size should be half your height. If you can only remember one number, your waist size is the one to know. Why? Because your waist size predicts your heart disease risk better than your weight or your Body Mass Index (BMI). If your waist size is over 35 inches in women and over 40 in men, it increases your risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, metabolic problems, high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol and even cancer.

If patients lose even 1 inch off their waist, they show improvements in all their other heart health numbers. Even if you gain even 1 inch, there will be worsening in those numbers. It's a much better indicator than weight, because you can be gaining weight and still losing waist size if you're working out and gaining lean muscle mass.

It's easy to measure yourself. Just get a non-elastic tape and measure around your belly button or:

- Measure the circumference of your waist at its smallest point.
- Measure the circumference of your hips at their widest point.
- Divide the waist measurement by the hip measurement.

6. Resting Heart Rate

When taking a pulse (heart rate) – your pulse is the rate at which your heart beats. As your heart pumps blood through your body, you can feel a pulsing in some of the blood vessels close to the skin's surface.

Target heart rates can be measured in slightly different ways. Your target heart rate is measured using your maximum heart rate (based on your age) and your resting heart rate, on how active you are.

The usual resting pulse for an adult is 60 to 100 beats per minute. Certain illnesses can cause your pulse to change, so it is helpful to know what your resting pulse is when you are well.

You can easily take your own pulse to find your resting heart rate. You can check your resting pulse the first thing in the morning, just after you wake up but before you get out of bed or you can sit or rest quietly for at least 10 minutes and then take your pulse.

To check your pulse, check your pulse on the inside of your wrist, below your thumb.

- Gently place 2 fingers of your other hand on this artery.
- Do not use your thumb because it has its own pulse that you may feel.
- Count the beats for 30 seconds; then double the result to get the number of beats per minute.

Your target heart rate depends on how physically fit you are. For example, if you are not active and not physically fit, your target heart rate is a little lower than the target heart rate of someone who exercises every day. This tool gives you a range of what your target heart rate is, based on how much you usually exercise.

To find your target heart rate range, you will choose the category that best matches your level of physical activity. The categories are:

- **Not active.** You do less than 30 minutes of light activity no more than 2 times a week. Cleaning house, slow walking, and playing golf are examples of light activity.
- **Moderately active.** You do up to 30 minutes of light to moderate activity 3 to 5 times a week. Brisk walking, jogging, riding a bike, swimming, and playing tennis are examples of moderate activity.
- **Very active.** You do more than 30 minutes of moderate activity at least 5 times a week.

An ideal resting heart rate should be 60 for men and 67 for women if you engage in cardiovascular exercises. Cardiovascular exercises are any exercises that get your heart rate up for 20 minutes and keep it up such as brisk walking, jogging, riding a bike, swimming, aerobics, etc.

Taking Medications to Keep Your Numbers Down

If your numbers are high, some doctors might recommend taking medications. However, everyone needs to understand that you can get off medications within 6 months or a year especially if you have been diagnosed with diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and other illnesses. It's much easier for people below the age of 50 or 60.

Being on medications especially for years can build up in your body and ravage your internal organs especially your liver which is in charge of cleaning out all medicines that you take. It's never a good idea to go on or be on medications even "over the counter" or "prescribed" for any amount of time.

The goal is to create an action plan to keep your numbers down and get off ALL medications instead of worrying about whether you can afford your medications.

Another key reason to get off all medications is taking "prescribed medications" can have a devastating effect if you are also take "over the counter medications" or other supplements (herbs, etc.).

No matter what your numbers, the most important thing to know is that they can all be helped or lowered by healthy lifestyle choices. Even small changes in your physical activity, your nutrition, and your smoking habits can have a major impact on your health.

Listening to your body will be key in managing your healthcare. If something doesn't feel right or if you have an unusual pain that causes concern, pay attention to it. See your doctor and find an answer. Be proactive about your health and seek help early. Get regular physicals and have appropriate screening tests which probably will increase the older you get. Also take your medications as directed, follow your doctor's orders, and obey posted and written rules.

It is going to be totally up to you to take control of your own health so you can make sure you receive the best quality of healthcare possible, which is your "human right."

To learn more about how to stay healthy read "*Top 12 Steps To Become Healthier Over the Next 30 Days*" (<http://howtotakecontrol.com/series3.html>) and "*Top 20 Steps to Boost Your Immune System*" (<http://www.howtotakecontrol.com/ImmuneSystem.html>).

Cathy Harris is a Motivational Speaker, Health Consultant and the author of "**How To Take Control of Your Own Life**" (<http://www.howtotakecontrol.com>). She is available for Lectures, Seminars, and Workshops and can be reached through her company, Angels Press, P.O. Box 870849, Stone Mountain, GA 30087, Phone: (770) 873-2072, Website: <http://www.cathyharrisspeaks.com>, Email: info@cathyharrisspeaks.com.

Note: The information provided is intended for educational purposes only. It is not meant to either directly or indirectly give medical advice or prescribe treatment. Please consult with your physician or other licensed health care professional for medical diagnosis, prescription, and treatment.

Copyright 2009 Cathy Harris. All Rights Reserved