

Know your numbers to watch heart health

Last year, Nadine Williams-Holmes began having chest pains, and the thought of having a heart attack sent her into a tailspin.

She had been an insulin-dependent diabetic for 13 years and taking blood pressure medication since her second pregnancy. Both diabetes and hypertension are major risk factors for cardiovascular disease, and she feared the worst.

"I wasn't prepared," says the 46-year-old nurse from Woodlawn. "I didn't know if I was going to see my children grow up."

Like many Americans, Williams-Holmes knew she could be in danger but didn't necessarily keep track of the details. Today, she carefully tracks her weight, her blood pressure, her blood sugar and her cholesterol levels.

Knowing the numbers that dictate your heart health will allow you to make smart choices today and as you age, particularly because age itself is a risk factor for coronary artery disease. Even if you think you're heart healthy, it's best to check with a doctor to be sure.

"It kind of boils down to this basic principle: The more risk factors you have, the more you need to know," says William R. Herzog, M.D., head of the Division of Cardiology at Sinai Hospital.

So what numbers do you need to know? For most people, the essential numbers include total cholesterol, blood pressure, and weight or body mass index measurement. Others, particularly those with a family history of diabetes or symptoms like high blood pressure, should also have a glucose screening to test for insulin resistance.

Knowing her numbers helped Williams-Holmes lose 60 pounds. She has daily blood sugar readings just above the normal range and an outstanding blood pressure rate of 120/70.

To take care of your heart, you should know these key numbers and how they impact your overall health.

Cholesterol

For patients with good health and a low risk of heart disease, a total cholesterol reading of 200 or lower is normal. If your results are good, Herzog suggests patients only be tested every three years.

Blood Pressure

High blood pressure is the largest risk factor for stroke, the third leading cause of death in America. Numbers to know, according to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, include high blood pressure – 140/90 and over; high blood pressure for diabetics – 130/80; and normal blood pressure – 120/80 and under.

Body Mass Index

The body mass index (BMI) formula measures weight relative to height. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, you should shoot for a score between 18.5 and 24.9. Individuals with a BMI of 30 or higher are considered obese, are generally 30 pounds or more overweight, and are at an even higher risk of cardiovascular disease.

It pays to know your numbers. To take a free online heart risk assessment and enter a drawing to receive one of 500 free Omron pedometers*, visit KnowYourNumbersBaltimore.com.

*While supplies last.

Bringing the Numbers in Line

If lifestyle changes alone don't work for you, most doctors will recommend medication as the next step. Taking a pill, however, doesn't free you from exercising and eating a healthy diet. Doctors warn that patients who abandon lifestyle changes once beginning medication will undermine the prescription's benefits.

When even medication doesn't work – or in cases where a patient has chest pain, blocked arteries or a full-blown heart attack – surgical interventions may be considered.

The Heart Center at Sinai offers a highly equipped cardiac catheterization laboratory - where doctors can look into your heart and check for blockages – and an Emergency Chest Pain Evaluation Unit that allows physicians to diagnose and begin treatment at the earliest possible moment.

To schedule an appointment with a LifeBridge Health cardiologist or for information on a free upcoming heart screening, call 410-601-WELL (9355).



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