MARCH OF DIMES | READY FOR LIFE

HEALTH LITERACY 101

WHAT IS HEALTH LITERACY?

Health literacy is the ability to find, understand, and use health information and services to make decisions about your health. This is not about knowing every medical term, but it is about having the information and tools you need to participate in your care. This can mean understanding the numbers on a blood pressure reading, knowing why your provider ordered a certain test, reading and understanding a medication label, or feeling comfortable asking questions when something is not clear. Even people who are comfortable reading and working with numbers can have difficulty when they encounter unfamiliar medical terminology, statistics, or information about risks or benefits.

The preconception period is an opportunity to learn about your current health, whether pregnancy is something you are considering soon, years from now, or you are just focusing on your overall wellness. Conditions revealed through health tests, such as high blood pressure and diabetes, can affect future pregnancy, so identifying and managing them before pregnancy can help support healthier outcomes.



Knowing your numbers is a starting point.

Instead of simply hearing and accepting that a result is "normal" or "high," you can ask:

What does this test measure? What does my number mean? Has it changed over time? Is there anything that I can do next?

HOW DO I READ COMMON TEST RESULTS?

Blood Pressure Test

What does it measure?

Blood pressure measures the force of blood in your blood vessels. The top number is the "Systolic Number" and measures pressure when your heart beats, while the bottom number is the "Diastolic Number" and measures pressure when your heart rests.

How do I read my results?

112/79
example reading
112 = Systolic | 79 = Diastolic

Category	Blood Pressure (mm Hg)
Normal	Below 120 and below 80
Elevated	120-129 and below 80
High (Stage 1)	130-139 or 80-89
High (Stage 2)	140+ or 90+

Why does it matter before pregnancy?

Identifying and managing high blood pressure before pregnancy can help reduce the risk of complications such as preeclampsia, stroke, and preterm birth.

Hemoglobin A1C

What does it measure?

A hemoglobin A1C (HbA1c) test is a blood test that estimates your average blood sugar level over the past 2-3 months.

How do I read my results?

Below 5.7%
Normal

5.7 - 6.4%
Prediabetes

Above 6.5%
Diabetes Range

An A1C in the diabetes range generally requires additional confirmation as other blood conditions can impact accuracy of this test.

Why does it matter before pregnancy?

Managing blood sugar before pregnancy is especially important because elevated blood sugar can increase the risk of birth defects and other pregnancy complications.

Cholesterol/Lipid Panel

What does it measure?

A cholesterol/lipid panel test measures different types of cholesterol and fats in your blood that help providers understand your cardiovascular health.

How do I read my results?

Measurement	General healthy level
Total Cholesterol	Below 200 mg/dL
LDL (low-density lipoprotein)	Below 100 mg/dL
HDL (high-density lipoprotein)	Higher is better!
Triglycerides	Below 150 mg/dL

These are general reference points. Cholesterol targets depend on your personal health history and cardiovascular risk.

Why does it matter before pregnancy?

Understanding cholesterol levels can help identify cardiovascular risk factors and guide healthy lifestyle changes before pregnancy. Speak with your provider to see if a lipid panel is needed in your preconception care.

STI Screening

What does it measure?

Tests for infections such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, HIV, and hepatitis. Testing may involve blood, urine, or swab samples.

How do I read my results?

Negative/Nonreactive

No evidence of the infection was detected by the test.

Positive/Reactive

The test detected a possible infection or marker that may require a follow-up, confirmation, or treatment.

Testing too soon after exposure can miss some infections. Results and follow-up depend on the specific test and result.

Why does it matter before pregnancy?

Identifying and treating STIs before pregnancy can help prevent complications, including infections, that may be transmitted to a baby during pregnancy or delivery.

Thyroid-Stimulating Hormone

What does it measure?

Thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) test is a blood rest the measures a hormone the helps regulate thyroid function. Thyroid hormones influence metabolism, energy, and reproductive health.

How do I read my results?

High TSH

May indicate an underactive thyroid. (hypothyroidism)

Low TSH

My indicate an overactive thyroid. (hyperthyroidism)

Why does it matter before pregnancy?

Untreated thyroid disorders can affect fertility and pregnancy outcomes. Testing may be recommended based on symptoms, medical history, or other risk factors rather than routinely.

Complete Blood Count

What does it measure?

A complete blood count (CBC) test measures different components of blood to identify anemia and infections.

How do I read my results?

Measurement	Healthy Range
Hemoglobin (Hgb)	12-16 g/dL
Red Blood Cells (RBC)	4.2-5.4 million/microL
White Blood Cells (WBC)	4.5k-11k cells/microL
Platelets (PLT)	150k-400k cells/microL

These ranges are approximate for nonpregnant birthing people. Reference ranges may vary by age, sex, and laboratory.

Why does it matter before pregnancy?

Low hemoglobin can indicate anemia. Identifying anemia and other blood-related concerns prior to pregnancy allows time to address deficiencies and support healthy blood production during pregnancy.

When opening your patient portal, do not panic if you see an H, L, red number, or results outside of these reference ranges. A lab result is one piece of information, not a diagnosis by itself.

Next Steps

- **Your result:** What number or result did you receive?
- **The reference range:** What range does that particular lab use?
- **The outcome and trend:** Where does this outcome fall in the reference range? How does this result compare with any previous result?
- **Ask your provider what this means for you.**

Understanding your health numbers during the preconception period can help you identify potential health concerns early and take proactive steps to support your overall well-being. By staying informed about your health and discussing your results with a health care provider, you can make informed decisions that support a healthier future, whether or not pregnancy is part of your plans.

Information for this newsletter was sourced from the MedlinePlus and the March of Dimes.
To learn more about preconception health and wellness, visit www.ncpreconceptionhealth.org