

# magic numbers

» New research on the digits that most affect your health



WE TEND TO GAUGE our well-being by the numbers. For some of us, it's the reading on the bathroom scale; for others, the zeroes on our paychecks. But while certain health-related numbers—weight, cholesterol, BMI, and blood pressure—may be uncomfortably familiar, other equally important ones are less well known, says Elizabeth Bower, M.D., assistant professor of medicine at Oregon Health and Science University. Here are five that really count.

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» **Minimum number of years you should maintain a steady weight.** A 2004 study in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* suggests that women who keep a consistent weight have stronger immune systems. The reason isn't clear, but weight fluctuations seem to impair the body's ability to produce infection-fighting cells, says study author Cornelia Ulrich, Ph.D.

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» **Maximum number of inches your waist should be.** More than that and you'll up your risk of heart disease—and that risk continues to grow with your waistline. Excess abdominal fat can create dangerous hormonal changes that contribute to high blood pressure and cholesterol. Research finds that, for women, this limit holds true regardless of height.

48

» **Maximum number of hours you should wait between workouts.** Researchers at the University of Missouri at Columbia found that when you're inactive longer than 2 days, the calories normally burned during exercise start to be stored as fat. Fat cells in lab rats can increase in size by 25 percent after 48 hours of missed workouts, explains lead researcher Frank Booth, Ph.D.

» **Minimum number of pounds of pressure you should be able to squeeze with one hand.** This is a key indicator of your overall muscle strength and may be a sign of how likely you are to develop osteoporosis. Studies suggest that people with a strong grip have denser bones and a lower risk for spine and hip fractures. To measure your grip strength, squeeze a device called a hand dynamometer, available at some gyms.

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60-80

» **Number of times per minute your heart should beat at rest.** Extremely fit athletes may have a lower rate, but anything under 60 beats per minute (especially if accompanied by dizziness) can indicate an irregular heartbeat or a thyroid disorder. A rate above 100 is a sign of poor fitness. Take your pulse while resting (count the beats for 10 seconds and multiply by six). If the number is outside this range, tell your doctor.