



What Your Blood Work Is Actually Telling You

A plain-English guide to understanding your lab results.

Getting lab results back can feel confusing or scary. Here's what those numbers actually mean — and what to do with them.

3 Things to Know Before You Panic

1

Reference ranges cover 95% of healthy people.

By definition, 1 in 20 perfectly healthy people will show a result outside the range. One flagged value alone is rarely a diagnosis.

2

"Normal" doesn't always mean healthy — and "abnormal" doesn't always mean sick.

Your doctor looks at trends, symptoms, medications, and context together. A single snapshot rarely tells the whole story.

3

Results must be interpreted in context.

Fasting status, recent exercise, stress, dehydration, and current medications all affect your numbers. Always share this context with your doctor.

The 4 Panels You'll See Most Often

CBC — Complete Blood Count

Checks your blood cells: oxygen delivery, immune system, and clotting ability.

Value	Normal Range	Plain English
Hemoglobin	Women 12–16 g/dL Men 13.5–17.5 g/dL	Your oxygen delivery capacity
WBC (White Blood Cells)	4,500–11,000 /mcL	Your immune system activity level
Platelets	150,000–400,000 /mcL	Your blood clotting ability
Hematocrit	Women 36–48% Men 41–53%	Percentage of blood made of red cells

CMP — Comprehensive Metabolic Panel

14 measurements of your blood chemistry, kidney function, liver function, and blood sugar.

Value	Normal Range	Plain English
Fasting Glucose	70–100 mg/dL	Your blood sugar level right now
Creatinine	Women 0.5–1.1 Men 0.7–1.3 mg/dL	How well your kidneys filter waste
BUN (Blood Urea Nitrogen)	7–20 mg/dL	Another kidney waste marker
ALT (Liver enzyme)	7–40 U/L	Indicator of liver stress or damage
Sodium	136–145 mEq/L	Fluid balance and nerve function



Lipid Panel — Cholesterol

Measures your cardiovascular risk. Fasting for 9–12 hours before the draw gives the most accurate result.

Value	Goal	Plain English
LDL Cholesterol	<100 mg/dL (optimal)	The “artery clogger” — lower is better
HDL Cholesterol	Women >55 Men >45 mg/dL	The “artery cleaner” — higher is better
Triglycerides	<150 mg/dL	Blood fats, linked to diet and metabolism
Total Cholesterol	<200 mg/dL	Overall cholesterol level

Thyroid (TSH) & A1C

Value	Normal Range	Plain English
TSH (Thyroid Stimulating Hormone)	0.4–4.0 mIU/L	Your thyroid's energy thermostat
A1C (Hemoglobin A1C)	<5.7% normal 5.7–6.4% prediabetes ≥6.5% diabetes	3-month average blood sugar — not affected by what you ate today

When Results Are Flagged: What to Do

1

Don't panic.

A single flagged value is rarely a diagnosis. Your doctor looks at patterns, not isolated numbers.

2

Call your doctor's office.

Ask: "What does this result mean for me specifically, and do I need a follow-up test?"

3

Share context.

Mention recent illness, medications or supplements, fasting status, and exercise in the 24 hours before the draw. All of these affect results.

4

Ask about trends.

Is this a new finding or consistent with past results? A value that's been stable for years has different meaning than one that just changed.

5

Clarify next steps.

Watch and repeat? Lifestyle change? Specialist referral? Get a clear plan before you leave the conversation.

5 Questions Worth Asking Your Doctor

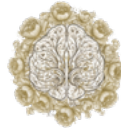
- “What does this result mean specifically for me?”
- “Is this a new finding, or consistent with past results?”
- “Do I need to repeat this test, and when?”
- “What lifestyle changes would move this number in the right direction?”
- “At what point would you recommend medication or a specialist?”

Sources



- MedlinePlus (NIH): medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/how-to-understand-your-lab-results
- Cleveland Clinic: my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diagnostics/24508-blood-tests
- NIH / NHLBI: nhlbi.nih.gov/health/blood-tests
- Harvard Health Publishing: health.harvard.edu (blood test results not quite normal)
- American Heart Association: heart.org (cholesterol guidelines)
- American Diabetes Association: diabetes.org (A1C standards)

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