

Your medical team will ask you to keep a home record of your VITALS, shorthand for **blood pressure, heart rate, and weight**. To make it easy, I have attached a printable worksheet (see Page 3). You will need to buy a home blood pressure machine and a good digital scale. Having my own record at hand in my MEDICAL NOTEBOOK provides historical perspective on current readings and trends. In the ER clinicians were glad I had my record with me for quick review. Below are general guidelines. *Set your VITALS goals with your doctor.*

BLOOD PRESSURE (BP)

Systolic, the top number: 100 - 120

Diastolic, the bottom number: 60 - 80

HEART RATE (HR, your pulse)

Most people: 60 - 70 beats-a-minute at rest

Heart transplants: 90 - 100 beats all the time

WEIGHT RANGE

Set this goal with your doctor.

GOOD VITALS

120/80-80 or less (S/D-HR) and your weight goal

Heart transplant patients: The gazillion tiny nerves snipped from our birth heart cannot be reattached to our donor heart. Some nerves grow back, but not many, which is why a transplanted heart is essentially “denervated.” Now lacking neural input the new heart clocks 90 to 100 beats-a-minute, whether we run or rest. Thankfully, the body has a communication work-around for the disconnection of the nervous system’s instant messaging system: Our vascular system takes over, though transmission is slower.

Set up the VITALS section in your MEDICAL NOTEBOOK

Behind the VITALS divider, insert a couple of 3-hole-punched, double-sided copies of the vitals log on page 3. Cut and paste the above goals onto the inside of the divider for easy reference.

How often should you record your vitals?

Ask your physician for guidance. During tough periods, you may need to be more attentive and take your vitals several times a day. During stable periods, once a week is the norm.

How long to hold onto these logs?

I keep 3 to 4 pages of current logs in my MEDICAL NOTEBOOK. The old logs I file for a year in case they are needed for comparison. When I graduated to a heart transplant, I happily tossed all those old records from the years of heart failure.

How to record your vitals

- **Date:** Month/day/year.
- **Time:** Note AM or PM; it may matter.
- **BP-HR:** Blood pressure and heart rate are listed in this order: systolic/diastolic-heart rate: 120/80-65. Systolic pressure (top number) is the force of your blood against the artery walls when your heart beats. Diastolic (bottom number) is your blood pressure when your heart is at rest between heart beats.
- **WT:** Weight changes may be symptomatic of more than holiday feasting or the flu. *Sudden* weight gain or loss is especially important to report.

Your NOTES/OBSERVATIONS matter

Every day you bring a different body to your cardiovascular condition. Note those differences in your vitals log. At right are a few entries from my heart failure period, when making a pot of soup or doing a load of laundry was a huge achievement.

Sample Entries: NOTES/OBSERVATIONS
Slightly winded on stairs; made soup; laundry
15 min yoga early am; better on stairs; shop w/Jack
Woke sweating; thought box went off in middle of nite. Took BP every few minutes. Concl: nightmare.
Dinner,theater,overnight in Portland +30 min. walk!
Decent energy; slightly winded
Walked 40 min on treadmill, 1.7 mph. Tired for dinner w/friends, strained, pale. Will back off...
Woke w/anxiety, slight breathing difficulty. Laid low, 20 min walk, 1.5 mph
Increased Toprol to 25 mg from 12.5
Normal, good day. Quietly grocery shopped.
Morning at rehab cut short bec. tired
Quiet, normal day. Walked 20 min, 1.5 mph
Woke w/slight but unmistakable crackly breathing: fluid in lungs? Stayed awake 1-2 hrs...My weight up; feel bloated, sluggish.

Medication changes, mood swings, fatigue, breathlessness, anxiety, depression, activity, a cold—all these are important details to record. Your clinical team needs your careful contextual observations when they ask, “How are you?”

Other vital information to record, perhaps in its own column

Before my heart transplant, I included a column labeled REST in which I noted the length of my afternoon naps. My increasing fatigue was yet another indicator of accelerating heart failure. Consider adding an extra column to your log for a vital symptom that you and your medical team are monitoring carefully; for example, angina or arrhythmia episodes. A clinician’s quick skim of that column may help in an emergency.

Please continue to page 3 for your vitals log.

