

The Health Hazard You've Never Heard Of

Getting a simple blood test for a little-known disease marker could save your life. *By Nancy Kalish*

YOU PROBABLY KNOW your blood pressure, and whether your cholesterol is high, low, or normal. But what about your CRP? Short for C-reactive protein, CRP is an indicator of inflammation within the body—a condition that can contribute to a host of serious ills.

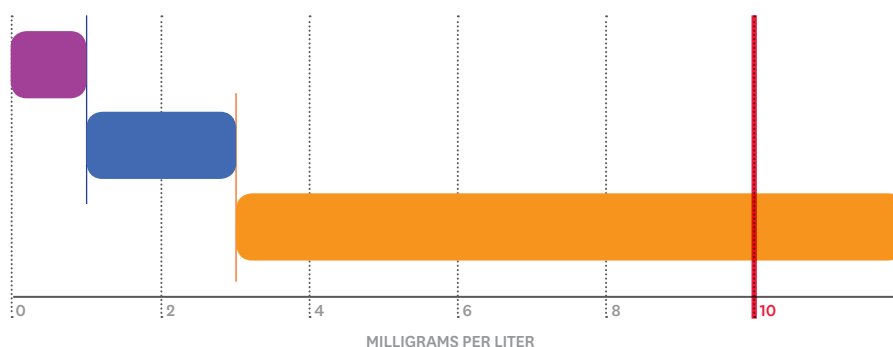
“Over time, chronic inflammation can do serious damage to healthy tissues,” says Mark Liponis, MD, medical director of Canyon Ranch and author of *UltraLongevity: The Seven-Step Program for a Younger, Healthier You*. “For one, it triggers a cascade of chemicals and processes that lead to blood clots and a buildup of plaque in the arteries.” According to the American Heart Association, people with high levels of CRP are twice as likely to suffer cardiac arrest as those with low levels. “This makes CRP the most important cardiovascular risk factor we have for men and women over age 50—more indicative than cholesterol, blood pressure, age, family history, and whether you smoke,” says Liponis.

However, because CRP testing is relatively new, it's not yet standard procedure at most doctors' offices. Ask for the simple blood test at your next physical. And don't do it just for your heart: A flood of research shows that elevated levels are connected to stroke, diabetes, colon cancer, arthritis, poor brain function, even Alzheimer's. Knowing your CRP—and bringing it down if it's high—is one of the best things you can do for your health.



How High Is High?

Your doc can test your CRP along with your cholesterol. Request the hs-CRP test (the newest and most sensitive), and have it done when you're feeling well. Here's how the numbers stack up, according to the American Heart Association.



BELOW 1 MILLIGRAM PER LITER (MG/L):
Low risk of heart disease.

1 TO 3 MG/L:
Average risk. The average American tests between 1 and 2 mg/L.

3 MG/L AND ABOVE:
High risk. About 25 percent of Americans fall into this category.

10 MG/L:
Experts consider this number abnormally high. It can result from a passing infection (such as the flu). Wait six weeks and retest.

The Risk Factors

If you meet any of these criteria, your CRP could be too high.



YOU'RE OVERWEIGHT.

Some fat cells, such as those in excess belly fat, secrete proteins that can cause inflammation. (According to one study, 50 percent of overweight individuals and 75 percent of obese people had elevated CRP.)

YOU EAT A LOT OF REFINED CARBS.

A Harvard Medical School study of otherwise healthy women found that those who ate the most carbs—such as white bread, muffins, and cold breakfast cereal (which the body digests quickly into sugar)—had the highest levels of CRP. Sugar can swiftly raise levels of insulin, a pro-inflammatory hormone.

YOU DON'T SLEEP ENOUGH.

Whether it's self-imposed or caused by a sleep disorder, a lack of rest triggers the release of the hormone cortisol, which boosts CRP. (Chronic stress can do the same the thing.)



YOU'RE ON THE PILL.

The hormones in oral contraceptives (estrogen and progestin) are processed first by your liver, where they are trapped and excreted, leading to inflammation.

YOU GET FREQUENT INFECTIONS.

A repeated inflammatory response to any kind of bug—from bronchitis and Lyme disease to bladder and sinus infections—can elevate your CRP.

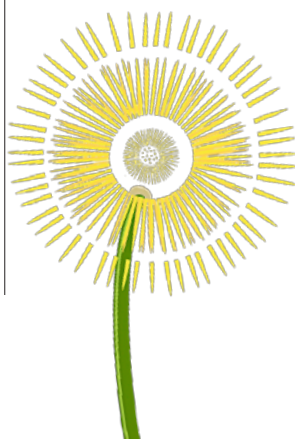


YOU DON'T FLOSS.

Bacteria between your teeth can infect your gums, allowing more bacteria to enter your bloodstream, where they can cause inflammation of the arteries. This is why severe gum disease can nearly double a person's risk of cardiovascular disease.

YOU HAVE CHRONIC ALLERGIES.

Allergens trigger the immune system to develop antibodies, which in turn cause connective tissue cells to release histamine—a chemical that fuels an inflammatory response.



How to Lower Your Levels

Mehmet Oz, MD, shares some easy tips to keep your CRP where it should be.

- **Get tested.** You should start checking your CRP as early as your 30s. It's useful to have a baseline number so you can head off any problems as you get older.
- **Stick to a Mediterranean diet.** A 2004 study found that adhering to a Mediterranean diet—rich in olive oil, fish, nuts, seeds, fruits, and vegetables—improves CRP levels by an average of 20 percent. To get started, try to consume three portions of fatty fish (such as salmon and tuna) twice a week and snack on walnuts between meals.
- **Supplement with vitamin C.** UC Berkeley researchers found that people with moderate to high CRP were able to bump down the number an average of 25 percent by consuming a daily dose of 1,000 milligrams of C. Two reputable, affordable brands are GNC and Nature Made.
- **Increase your fiber.** In a 2008 study, people who consumed fiber-rich diets were 63 percent less likely to have high CRP than people whose diets were fiber-poor. A simple trick for upping your fiber intake is leaving the skin on fruits and vegetables. Or add a teaspoon of the fiber supplement psyllium to a glass of water or juice in the morning.
- **Enjoy (some) dark chocolate.** A recent Italian study revealed that dark chocolate is associated with significantly lower levels of CRP, but only in moderation. Eat no more than 20 grams (about half a Hershey's-size bar or one-fifth of an artisanal bar) twice a week. And make sure the chocolate is at least 30 percent cocoa.



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