BY LING XU, M.D.

Special to the Times

Blood pressure and cholesterol levels — the “silent killers” — have a significant impact on our

risk for heart disease and stroke but rarely have any symptoms, hence the nickname.

To identify potential problems, physicians ensure both are within a safe range, but what constitutes “safe” is a moving target.

A blood pressure measurement includes two numbers. The higher number is a measure of the pressure exerted on your vascular walls while the heart is contracted. The lower number is a measure of the pressure while the heart is relaxed.

Cholesterol tests measure the levels of three types of cholesterol in the blood stream, HDL or “good cholesterol” and LDL or “bad cholesterol” and triglyceride.

By themselves, too much bad cholesterol, too many triglycerides, or too little good cholesterol can both be problematic. A combination of two or three unhealthy numbers, though, can significantly increase the risk of heart disease and stroke.

Healthy blood pressures

A safe blood pressure level used to be defined as a top number below 140 and a bottom number below 90. Today, a bottom number between 80 and 99 or a top number between 130 and 139 is considered pre-hypertension.

We also now know that pre-hypertension can increase an individual’s overall risk of heart disease or stroke two-fold compared to a healthy individual. As blood pressure goes higher so does the relative risk.

Healthy cholesterol levels

An individual’s safe cholesterol level can vary quite a bit. Risk factors such as existing heart disease, diabetes, age or a family history of early heart disease, can all impact your overall risk level, which determines your individual target cholesterol levels.

Those that fall into the low-to-moderate risk group, for example, should aim for an LDL level below 130, while those in the high-risk group should aim for an LDL level below 100.

Keeping your heart healthy

Several factors can influence which risk group you fall into, and your risk group can change over time. In addition, blood pressure and cholesterol levels, factors such as smoking, obesity, a lack of physical activity, mental stress and depression can also significantly increase your likelihood of developing premature cardiovascular diseases.

Beginning no later than age 40, ask your doctor at every annual physical which risk group you fall into and what you should do to manage your cholesterol.

You should also know what your safe blood pressure range is. If your blood pressure is rising over time but is still within a healthy range, preemptive lifestyle changes can stop an unhealthy condition from developing.

If you do develop unhealthy blood pressure or cholesterol levels, talk with your doctor about your individual risk factors. Some factors, such as smoking, obesity and a sedentary lifestyle, can be modified. Other factors, such as family history and age, cannot.

Knowing which factors you can impact makes it much easier to manage your own health.

Ling Xu, M.D., is a board certified internal medicine specialist and an Eden Medical Center-affiliated physician.