Normal Vital Signs by Age: Adult, Child and Infant

Heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, temperature and SpO_2 from newborn to adult, and when to report

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NORMAL VITAL SIGNS BY AGE

Normal vital signs by age change most in the first years of life: the younger the child, the faster the heart rate and breathing and the lower the blood pressure. Values are for a calm, resting person; ranges vary by source, so use the range your exam item or facility gives.

Heart rate: MedlinePlus (NIH). Breathing rate and systolic BP: PALS-based table (First10EM). Well-trained athletes may rest at 40–60/min.

AGE	HEART RATE (/MIN)	BREATHING RATE (/MIN)	SYSTOLIC BP (MM HG)
Newborn (0–1 mo)	70–190	40–60	60–90
Infant (1–11 mo)	80–160	25–50	70–110
1–2 yr	80–130	20–30	72–110
3–4 yr	80–120	20–26	78–112
5–6 yr	75–115	18–24	82–115
7–9 yr	70–110	18–22	86–118
10–14 yr	60–100	16–20	90–130
Adult	60–100	12–18 (12–20 in many texts)	90–119 (normal under 120/80)

EXAM TIP Count an infant's breathing for a full 60 seconds; infant breathing is irregular. Take vital signs at rest, before anything upsetting such as an injection.

ADULT BLOOD PRESSURE CATEGORIES

Severe readings with chest pain, confusion, vision change, weakness or short breath suggest organ damage (hypertensive emergency): report at once.

CATEGORY	SYSTOLIC	DIASTOLIC
Normal	Under 120	and under 80
Elevated	120–129	and under 80
Stage 1 hypertension	130–139	or 80–89
Stage 2 hypertension	140 or higher	or 90 or higher
Severe hypertension	Over 180	and/or over 120

Low blood pressure in adults is generally under 90/60. A low reading matters most when it is new or comes with dizziness, confusion or low urine output.

TEMPERATURE

- Average 98.6 °F (37 °C); normal about 97.7–99.1 °F (36.5–37.3 °C), lowest in the early morning.
- Fever (common definition): 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher.
- Child fever by route: rectal 100.4 °F (38 °C), oral 99.5 °F (37.5 °C), underarm 99 °F (37.2 °C).
- Infant 3 months or younger with a rectal temperature of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher: notify the provider right away.

OXYGEN SATURATION (SPO_2)

- Normal: 95–100% on room air.
- Lower can be acceptable in COPD or at high altitude; follow the ordered target range.
- A pulse oximeter can read 2–4% above or below the true value.
- Less accurate with cold skin, poor circulation, dark nail polish, artificial nails, tobacco use and darker skin pigmentation.

SAFETY Treat the client, not the number: a client who is short of breath, confused or blue needs help even if the SpO_2 looks normal. Check the probe and the waveform before trusting a sudden change.

WHEN TO REPORT

- Any value outside the expected range that is new, worsening or comes with symptoms.
- A trend, even inside normal: a heart rate creeping up while blood pressure drifts down.
- Possible sepsis: with suspected infection, 2 or more of breathing rate 22/min or higher, new confusion, systolic BP 100 or lower.
- Severe BP over 180/120, or any BP with signs of organ damage.
- Children: a rising heart rate or breathing rate, slow capillary refill or reduced alertness. Falling blood pressure is a late sign of shock.

EXAM TIP On the NCLEX, an abnormal vital sign that fits the client's condition and is stable is often expected; the priority is the new or unexpected change, especially in airway, breathing or circulation.

Sources (11) are listed with links at rnbasics.com/sheets/normal-vital-signs.html. For education and exam preparation only. Not medical advice; follow current guidelines and your institution's protocols. RN Basics is an independent study aid not affiliated with any certifying body.