

Preventive Health Care – Screening Tests

Screening tests can find diseases early, when they are easier to treat. The tests you get and how often you should get them depend on your age, health history, and risk factors such as family history and lifestyle. Talk with your doctor about which tests are right for you, when you should have them, and how often. The following are general guidelines based on recommendations of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force and other preventive medicine experts.



Blood pressure. High blood pressure can lead to heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease. High blood pressure is more common in African American people and people older than 45. Starting at age 18, have your blood pressure checked at least every two years, more often if you are overweight or have a risk factor related to age or race.

Cholesterol. Too much cholesterol can clog your blood vessels and cause heart disease. Men should have their cholesterol checked at least every five years starting at age 35, and women who have no risk factors for heart disease should begin checking their cholesterol by age 45. If you smoke or have diabetes or if heart disease or cholesterol problems run in your family, start having your cholesterol checked at age 20. Some pediatricians are now doing routine cholesterol testing during the preteen years.

Diabetes. Diabetes, or high blood sugar, is a major cause of blindness, kidney disease, high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, and amputation of the lower legs and feet. Almost all adults who have diabetes have Type 2 diabetes, which usually appears in middle age. You should have a test to screen for diabetes if you are 45 years of age or older and overweight. If you are under the age of 45 or over 45 and at a healthy weight, you may still need to be tested for diabetes if you have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or belong to a high-risk group, including having family members with diabetes. Talk with your doctor to determine if you belong to a high-risk group.

Depression. If you've felt sad or hopeless and have felt little interest or pleasure in doing things for two weeks straight, talk with your health care provider about getting screened for depression. Many people don't recognize the signs of depression, so your doctor may screen you for it as part of a routine checkup. Depression may also be a sign of other diseases (such as low thyroid), so don't ignore these symptoms.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). If you're sexually active, talk with your doctor about whether you should be screened for sexually transmitted diseases, such as herpes, gonorrhea, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, syphilis, chlamydia, trichomoniasis, and HIV. Some of these diseases, like gonorrhea and chlamydia, can be asymptomatic but lead to serious health problems if undetected and untreated. Be aware that your risk increases if you or your partner has or had other sexual partners, if you don't use condoms consistently and correctly, if your partner has an STD, or if you use injection drugs.

Colorectal cancer. Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of death from cancer after lung cancer. You should be tested for colorectal cancer starting at age 45 and continuing until age 75. Tell your doctor if you have a history of polyps or a family history of cancer of the colon, ovaries, or uterus, in which case you may need to be screened earlier.

Prostate cancer. Most men talk with their doctors about getting screened for prostate cancer when they reach age 50. If the disease runs in the family and for African American men, earlier screening may be advisable.

Breast cancer. The American Cancer Society recommends annual mammograms for women aged 40 and older. Women should know how their breasts normally feel and promptly report any changes to their health care provider.

Cervical cancer. Women aged 21 to 29 should have a Pap smear to screen for cervical cancer every three years. Starting at age 30, women can consider Pap testing every five years if the procedure is combined with testing for HPV.

Osteoporosis. Osteoporosis, or thinning bones, makes your bones break easily. This condition is more common in women, especially those who are postmenopausal, than in men. A bone density test can help determine whether your bones are prone to breaking. Women should have a bone density test at age 65, and at younger ages if they have a higher-than-usual risk of bone fracture.

Skin cancer. Every month, you should check your skin from head-to-toe and look for any moles or lesions that are new, changing, or unusual. You may want to have an annual full-body exam for skin cancer if you are over 40 or have other risk factors for skin cancer, such as a family history of the disease, multiple sunburns when younger, or excessive sun exposure (such as jobs working outdoors).

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