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Fact sheet

Health checks for women

Women need to have regular health checks. See your doctor for regular medical check-ups to help you stay healthy and to pick up early warning signs of disease or illness. Many diseases such as cardiovascular (heart) disease, diabetes and some cancers can be picked up in their early stages, when treatment is often more effective.

Women should have a general check-up every year. Part of the check-up will involve talking to your doctor about your medical history, your family's history of disease and your lifestyle choices such as diet, exercise habits and whether or not you smoke or drink alcohol.

If you have high risk factors – such as a family history of a disease – it may be more likely that you will develop a particular disease. Regular check-ups may help your doctor pick up early warning signs like high blood pressure.

Be guided by your doctor, but if you are at high risk of a particular disease, it is recommended that you get tested regularly, regardless of your age.

Self-checking health checks for women

Make self-checking part of your regular routine. This will help you stay healthy and pick up potential problems early. Things you can check at home include:

- Skin checks – You should check your skin every three months for unusual moles or freckles. See your doctor if you notice anything unusual. Women at high risk need regular examination by their doctor or dermatologist.
- Dental care – You can reduce your risk of tooth decay, gum disease and tooth loss if you clean your teeth regularly, eat a low-sugar diet and visit the dentist at least once a year.
- Diet – you can improve your general health with a healthy diet that includes fruits, vegetables, adequate iron and calcium. Have at least two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables each day.
- Weight – maintaining a healthy weight range prevents longer-term diseases such as diabetes and arthritis.
- Alcohol – women who have at least two alcohol-free days per week and keep to safe drinking levels – no more than two standard drinks per drinking day – have better health outcomes.
- Smoking – smoking increases your risk of many diseases including heart disease, stroke, lung disease and thin bones. If you smoke, try to give up.
- Exercise – regular exercise can prevent diseases developing as well as being good for your mental health, heart and bones. It is recommended you have at least 2.5 hours of exercise per week.

Pap tests, STI screening and pregnancy checks for women

Health checks from your doctor can include:

- Pap tests – you should have a pap test every two years. This screening test is an important test to pick up signs of irregularities that could lead to cervical cancer if not treated. The first pap test should be within two years of the first time you have sex and you should continue to have them every two years until you are 70. Even if you have been vaccinated, you should continue to have regular pap tests. If you have an increased risk of cervical cancer, you may need more regular testing. Be advised by your doctor
- STI screening – if you are sexually active, you should get tested for chlamydia every year between the ages of 15 and 29. Chlamydia is very common and does not always show symptoms. The test is a simple urine test. If you are at risk of other sexually transmissible infections, ask your doctor about further testing
- Pregnancy – you should have a general check-up before becoming pregnant to discuss any health risks during pregnancy. Once you are pregnant, regular antenatal checks help monitor your baby's development, pick up abnormalities and assess your health.

Tests include ultrasound scans, urine tests, blood tests and genetic tests. Some antenatal tests are recommended for all pregnant women, while others are only necessary for women at increased risk of complications. Be advised by your doctor.

Heart health checks for women

Health checks for heart disease may include:

- Blood pressure – have your blood pressure checked every two years if your blood pressure is normal and there is no family history of high blood pressure. If your blood pressure is on the high side, or you have a personal or family history of high blood pressure, stroke or heart attack, it's best to have it checked more frequently. Be advised by your doctor
- Blood tests – it is a good idea to check your cholesterol levels and blood triglycerides from time to time. High levels may indicate an increased risk of various health problems including heart disease. If you're over 45, you should have these blood tests once every two years and more frequently as you get older. If you're at high risk of cardiovascular disease, you should be tested every year.
- Obesity tests – being overweight is a significant risk factor for many health conditions, including cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Ask your doctor to check your body mass index (BMI) and waist measurement every two years.

Diabetes health checks for women

Tests for diabetes include the fasting blood sugar level test. This involves measuring the amount of glucose in the blood after you haven't eaten for a while. Depending on your risk level, you will need to be tested every year or once every three years.

You are at higher risk of type 2 diabetes if you:

- are over 45 years old and obese (BMI over 30)
- had gestational diabetes in a pregnancy
- have polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS)
- have a family history of diabetes
- are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander woman aged over 35 years
- belong to any of certain ethnic groups – including Pacific Islander and Sri Lankan women.

Breast cancer health checks for women

Women of any age should visit the doctor immediately if they notice any breast changes. Women aged between 50 and 70 years who have no personal or family history of breast cancer should have a screening mammogram (breast x-ray) every two years. If you have a personal or family history of breast cancer, your doctor can help you to decide how often you need to be screened, but generally speaking, annual check-ups may be advised.

Eye health checks for women

Eyesight tends to deteriorate with age. It is recommended that:

- Every woman over 40 should have regular eye examinations. An optometrist can test for glaucoma, a serious eye condition characterised by high fluid pressure within the eyeball. Women at increased risk will need to be tested for glaucoma at an earlier age. Risk factors include family history, diabetes, prior eye injury, high blood pressure or use of steroids.
- Women aged between 50 and 65 should have a general eye examination every two years.
- Women aged over 65 should have an eye examination once a year.

Bowel cancer health checks for women

The faecal occult blood test (FOBT) uses chemicals to check a stool sample for blood. If you're over 50, you should have this test once every two years.

Women with a family history or who are otherwise at high risk of bowel cancer may need a colonoscopy every five years. During this test, you are given light sedation and the doctor inserts a slender instrument called a colonoscope through the anus to visually check your rectum and large bowel for any abnormalities.

Bone density health checks for women

Osteoporosis is a disease that causes thinning of the bones. Menopause is a significant risk factor for women. A bone density test helps to determine the health of your bones.

Bone density testing is most often used when people have:

- osteoporosis or concerns about osteoporosis (such as family history)
- risk factors for osteoporosis – including a thin build, early menopause, long times with no periods when younger, age over 70 years, long-term use of cortisone medication
- spinal deformity causing bending over in the upper back
- a previous fracture, not caused by a fall or trauma.

Other health tests for women

You may need other regular tests not listed here, depending on your personal or family medical history. Ask your doctor for further information.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dentist
- Eye specialist

Things to remember

- See your doctor for regular medical check-ups.
- Screening tests help doctors to detect many diseases such as cardiovascular (heart) disease, diabetes and some cancers in their early stages.
- A woman at high risk of a particular disease should be regularly tested regardless of her age.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health logo-links to further info

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