Women's Health Guide 20s

Hartford HealthCare Medical Group
A Guide to Women’s Health

As women transition through puberty, child-bearing years, menopause and post-menopause, their bodies undergo significant changes. Having a list of important health screenings, healthy living tips, and self-health checks can help women take care of themselves and reduce their risk of heart disease, autoimmune diseases, cancer and other medical issues.

General Health Screenings for Women

While a woman’s age will determine whether she needs to schedule certain health checks, there are several important screenings that should be on the radar for most adult and teenage women:

**Routine screenings:** Blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes screenings are recommended for women over the age of 18. Factors such as age, obesity, family history and pregnancy will determine how frequently these tests are needed.

**Gynecologic care:** Seeing a women’s health provider periodically for a check-up is important. New cervical cancer screening guidelines recommend less frequent Pap tests for younger women and no Pap tests for many older women. Talk to your health care provider about the frequency of exams that are best suited for your health.

**Immunizations:** It’s recommended that teen and adult women receive an annual flu shot, certain booster shots, and other immunizations, including the HPV vaccine, that are not given to them as children.

General Healthy Living Tips

**Medical checkups:** Schedule a physical or appointment with a primary care physician at least once every three years if you are under the age of 50. These appointments focus on preventing illness, rather than addressing current health problems or medication refills (which would be addressed separately in an office visit).

**Exercise:** Perform aerobic exercises (such as running, swimming, or brisk walking) for at least 30 minutes, five days a week, along with at least two days of resistance/strength work.
Eat a balanced and nourishing diet: Eat fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy and proteins and avoid foods that contain added sugars, sodium and saturated and trans-fat.

Sun safety: Sunscreen, shade and protective clothing are three ways women can protect themselves from unhealthy sun exposure.

Sleep: Aim for 7-8 hours of sleep per night.

Stress management and prevention: Try meditation, exercise, listening to music, or other activities that help you manage stress.

Routine Self-Health Checks

1. Breast health: It’s important to be generally aware of your breast health. Any changes in your breast health such as pain, lumps, bumps, or skin changes should be reported to your doctor.

2. Skin exam (monthly): Check for new growths, spots, or bumps. Look for changes in the size, color, or shape of existing blemishes. Take note of rough or scaly textures. If you spot a change, notify your doctor so they can perform further examination.

Know Your Family History

Your family's medical history, lifestyles, environments and habits can influence your health. Try to find out key family medical history details, such as:

- Any diseases or conditions that affect/affected close family members
- Whether more than one relative had/has the same disease
- Whether a parent or close relative has/had/is a carrier for certain genetic conditions
- How old a relative was when they contracted a disease
- If any close relatives suffered from mental health issues or substance abuse issues
Women’s Health: Your 20s.

Learn your baseline.

Your 20s are a great time to establish healthy habits and learn about your baseline health. During this time, many women are balancing education, careers, family, and social lives. Women are also often sexually active at this point in their lives, and their hormones are peaking. As such, it’s important for women in their 20s to not let their health fall to the wayside.

Healthcare Habits to Start in Your 20s

1. **Find a primary care doctor**: Your primary care will become the person who knows your medical history best, so it’s important to start seeing one in your 20s. A primary care provider will monitor important health markers such as blood pressure, cholesterol, A1C, and thyroid levels.

2. **Schedule regular dental, hearing, and eye exams**: Women should receive a dental exam every 6 months and an eye exam every 1-2 years. It’s recommended that women receive a hearing test once every 10 years, so having at least one test during your 20s should suffice.

3. **Take stock of your mental health**: Certain types of mental illness – including unipolar depression and anxiety – are more common in women than men. While your primary care provider will often ask questions to screen for mental illness, take note if you are experiencing symptoms such as persistent sadness, excessive worry or fear, fluctuating energy levels, and changes in sleep patterns.

4. **Use protection (against the sun)**: Use sunscreen every day, even if it’s cloudy. The most effective sunscreens have an SPF of 30 or higher. This will keep your skin healthy and help to prevent premature aging marks from the sun.
Sexual and Reproductive Health

Even if you are not sexually active, it’s important to take steps to take care of your sexual and reproductive health.

1. **Pay attention to your period:** Abnormally light or heavy periods, bleeding between periods or missed periods, pain/cramping, and headaches during menstruations are just some symptoms that could indicate a menstrual disorder. Talk to your doctor about your menstrual cycle.

2. **Discuss birth control:** Even if you are not sexually active, birth control may help treat hormonal imbalances and other conditions. Talk to your doctor about what birth control method is best for you. Options include “The Pill,” IUDs, implants, shots, condoms and more.

3. **Monitor your thyroid:** 1 in 8 women develop a thyroid problem in their lifetime. Talk to your doctor about symptoms such as weight gain/loss, hair loss, or other changes in your general health.

4. **Schedule pap & HPV tests:** Women in their 20s should be screened for cervical cancer. This may be performed with a pap test or HPV test, talk with your doctor about how frequently these need to be done. Newer guidelines recommend these tests every few years if you are healthy.

5. **STDs/STIs – Protect and test:** About 1 in 5 people in the U.S. had a sexually transmitted infection in 2018. To avoid STIs and their complications, use a condom during sexual intercourse and see a doctor regular for testing.
Maternity care

Maternal healthcare is extremely important, regardless of your age. Maintaining healthy habits throughout your pregnancy is important, so be sure to prioritize the following:

- **Prenatal checkups:** See a doctor or midwife as soon as you suspect that you are pregnant, and work with your provider to determine an appropriate schedule of checkups for the duration of your pregnancy.

- **Nutrition:** Ask your doctor about your calorie needs while pregnant, prenatal vitamins and mineral supplements, and which foods are unsafe for you to consume while pregnant.

- **Smoking, alcohol, and other substances:** Do not smoke cigarettes or marijuana or consume alcohol while pregnant. Do not ingest illegal substances (such as cocaine or other drugs) while pregnant, and talk to your doctor about the safety of any medications (prescription or over-the-counter) you take.

- **Risk factors:** Diabetes, high blood pressure and other medical problems can develop or worsen during pregnancy. Preexisting conditions, including obesity and nutritional deficiencies, can also cause increased problems during pregnancy. Talk to your doctor about your risk factors you may have. They will be able to recommend a treatment or disease management plan to keep you and your unborn child at your healthiest.
Preventing Heart Disease

Heart disease is the number one killer of women. In addition to general healthy living tips – such as getting plenty of exercise, eating healthy, and managing stress levels – here are a few things you can do to protect your heart's health:

- **Monitor blood pressure:** Check your blood pressure frequently, as uncontrolled high blood pressure is a common contributor to heart disease.

- **Don't smoke:** If you're a smoker, find a way to quit. Non-smokers should not start smoking.

- **Limit alcohol intake:** Expert recommendations vary, but most agree that moderate alcohol consumption for women means no more than 1 drink per day and no more than 7 drinks per week.