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 screenings, 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 and every year if you are over 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 30s.

Be proactive about your health.

Taking care of your health in your 30s is critical to reducing your risk of health challenges later in life. Your 30s are also when many women are considering starting or expanding their family, and therefore fertility and reproductive health is important, and there are many things that women in their 30s can do to be proactive about their health.

Physicals

By seeing a primary care provider at least once every three years, you’re helping your doctor paint a full picture of your medical history and current health. Your primary care provider can assess your risk factors, monitor key indicators such as blood pressure and cholesterol, and refer you to appropriate specialists if you need additional care or testing.

Pelvic Health

In addition to seeing a women’s health provider for routine pelvic health checks and cervical cancer screening such as a pap test or HPV test, women in their 30s should also talk to their gynecologist or primary care doctor about the importance of pelvic strength. Childbirth, obesity, high intensity exercise and other factors can reduce your pelvic floor strength – which can lead to incontinence and other issues in your 30s and beyond.
Maternity Care

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.

- **General 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 any 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.

- **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.
High-Risk Pregnancy and Infertility

Many women in their 30s are able to have healthy and safe pregnancies. However, the risk of having pregnancy-related complications increases for women over the age of 35, and some women in their 30s may have difficulty conceiving. If you’re thinking of becoming pregnant in your 30s, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Infertility:** Some women experience a slight decline in fertility around age 32 and a steeper decline around age 37. However, infertility is not always caused by age. If you’re having trouble conceiving, talk to your doctor about testing and options.

- **Miscarriage:** Risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure and thyroid issues can increase the chance of a miscarriage. Talk to your doctor about managing preexisting conditions during your pregnancy.

- **Genetic testing:** The risk of a child having genetic abnormalities increases as the mother gets older. Some abnormalities can also increase the risk of miscarriage. Your doctor can help you decide if genetic testing is appropriate for you and your baby.

- **Birth-related complications:** Some birth and labor complications – including preeclampsia, premature labor and cesarean birth – are more common for women in their 30s. Consistent prenatal care can help you and your doctor identify risk factors for complications and create a birth plan that meets your needs.

Perimenopause

Some women begin to experience symptoms of perimenopause as early as their mid-30s, though its onset is more common once women enter her 40s. During perimenopause, your body begins the natural transition to menopause, causing your levels of estrogen to fluctuate. This is perfectly normal, but contact your doctor when you start experiences perimenopause symptoms, such as:

- Irregular periods
- Sleep problems
- Hot flashes
- Vaginal dryness or painful intercourse
- Mood changes (including irritability or depression)
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.