Women's Health Guide 40s
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.

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**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.

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**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 40s.

Managing a Changing Body.

Your 40s bring about a period of transition for your body. During this time, you may notice certain signs of aging. Taking a proactive approach to healthcare – including talking to your doctor about preventive screenings and your risk factors – is important.

Primary Care

As women enter their 40s, the risk of degenerative diseases and other medical issues increase. It’s important to visit a primary care doctor regularly – at least once every three years – to receive screenings for diabetes, high cholesterol, BMI evaluation and other risk factors.

Heart Disease – Detection and Prevention

Heart disease is the number one killer of women. Risk factors for heart disease in women include (but are not limited to) diabetes, stress and depression, smoking, menopause, pregnancy complications and a family history of heart disease.

Symptoms of a heart attack are often different in women than in men and include:

- Pain in one or both arms
- Nausea or vomiting
- Neck, jaw, shoulder, upper back or abdominal discomfort
- Shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Lightheadedness or dizziness
- Fatigue
- Indigestion

If you think you are having a heart attack, call 911 and seek medical treatment immediately.
In addition to general healthy living tips – such as getting plenty of exercise, eating healthy and managing stress levels. Be sure to prioritize the following:

- **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.

**Additional Important Screenings**

- **Breast cancer:** Experts recommend women over 40 receive a mammogram every year. It’s important to note that there are some varying guidelines for mammogram screening, and so it’s important to talk to your primary care provider about the best screening strategy for you.

- **Colon cancer:** Colonoscopies are recommended every 10 years for people between the ages of 45 and 75. However, some experts recommend screening for colon/colorectal cancer more frequently if you have a family history of colorectal cancer, colon polyps, or inflammatory bowel disease. There are other tests, including checking the stool for blood, that can be done more frequently. Talk to your doctor about your risk factors.

- **Osteoporosis:** While bone-thinning is more common for women in their 50s and 60s, it is possible for women in their 40s to begin to experience osteoporosis. Risk factors include a history of eating disorders, long-term lack of exercise, and not getting enough calcium. Talk to your doctor about your individual risk level.
Sexual Wellness and Pelvic Health

As estrogen levels decrease leading up to menopause, many women experience vaginal dryness and slower sexual arousal – this is normal, and your doctor can often recommend methods for addressing such symptoms. Research also suggests that a woman’s sex drive may be at its highest during late 30s and 40s. To ensure that you maintain your sexual wellness, be mindful of the following:

- **STIs/STDs:** Continue to practice safe sex and get tested as needed if you are sexually active.
- **Pelvic strength:** Childbirth, obesity, high intensity exercise and other factors can reduce your pelvic floor strength – which can lead to incontinence and other issues as you age.
- **Unintended pregnancy:** Many women are still fertile during their early/mid 40s, so speak with a doctor about birth control or family planning methods.

High-Risk Pregnancy and Fertility Struggles

The risk of having pregnancy-related complications increases for women over the age of 35, and women in their 40s may have a harder time conceiving. If you’re thinking of becoming a mother in your 40s, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Infertility:** Women may experience a slight decline in fertility around age 32 and a steeper decline around age 37. If you’re having trouble conceiving, talk to your doctor about testing and options.
- **Miscarriage:** Women in their 40s are more likely to have a chronic condition that can increase your risk of miscarriage, including diabetes, high blood pressure and thyroid issues. 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. Your doctor can help you decide if genetic testing is necessary 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 40s. Consistent prenatal care can help you and your doctor identify risk factors for complications and create a birth plan that meets your needs.

• Staying active: Your overall fitness level can become a risk factor during an over-40 pregnancy. Staying active can help you feel physically better throughout your pregnancy.

Perimenopause

Some women begin to experience symptoms of perimenopause as early as their mid-30s, though its onset is more common once women enter their 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)