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 an annual 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 50s.

Taking care of yourself as you age.

Women in their 50s are entering a new phase of their life. Being proactive about managing your health can help protect you from long-term health problems. Menopause, heart health, bone strength and other risks should be top of mind for women in their 50s.

Primary Care

Annual physicals and health screenings are very important for women in their 50s. Your primary care provider will screen for risk factors and determine whether you’ll need to see a specialist for additional testing. Your doctor may also administer vaccines for shingles, the flu, pneumonia and other illnesses that can impact women over 50 more seriously than younger people.

Menopause

Menopause can be officially diagnosed 12 months after a woman’s last menstrual period. While it’s not uncommon for women to begin to experience menopause in their 40s, the average age for menopause to begin is 51. In the months or years leading up to menopause, many women experience symptoms of perimenopause, which include:

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

Note that while menopause and perimenopause are completely natural biological processes, your doctor may be able to help treat or manage discomfort and the more disruptive symptoms of both processes. Ask your doctor about lifestyle changes, hormone therapy, or other recommendations they may have to keep you feeling like you.
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. Some risk factors – such as weight gain – this can be more common in women in their 50s and 60s.

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 eating healthy and managing stress levels, be sure to prioritize the following:

- **Exercise regularly:** Research shows that a sedentary lifestyle can increase your risk of developing heart disease, and that exercise can help improve the elasticity of blood vessels.

- **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.
Urinary Incontinence

After menopause, women often experience urinary incontinence, which results from the loss of elasticity in the tissues of the vagina and urethra. The two major types of urinary incontinence women experience are:

- **Urge incontinence:** The sudden, strong and frequent urge to urinate followed by involuntary loss of urine.
- **Stress incontinence:** Loss of urine when coughing, laughing or lifting something.

Strengthen your pelvic floor by doing Kegel exercises and talk to your doctor about topical treatments that can help ease symptoms of urinary incontinence.
Additional Important Screenings

- **Breast cancer**: Experts recommend women ages 40-54 receive a mammogram every year, and that women 55+ continue to get mammograms every 1-2 years. 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**: Bone-thinning is common for women in their 50s and 60s. During menopause, estrogen levels drop, which can lead to bone loss. Other 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.