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 60s.

Taking care of yourself as you age.

Women in their 60s can take certain actions to improve their long-term health. Eating right, maintaining a healthy weight, and keeping track of any changes you notice in your everyday health are more important than ever.

Primary Care

Annual physicals and health screenings are very important for women in their 60s. Your primary care provider will screen for risk factors for heart disease, diabetes and other issues. They will also determine whether you need to see a specialist for any additional testing. It’s recommended that women in their 60s receive an annual flu vaccine and a pneumonia vaccine around age 65. If you haven’t yet had a shingles vaccine, this is also recommended.

Importance of Balance, Strength and Flexibility

The CDC recommends that adults 65 and older get 150 minutes of moderate endurance activity each week. In addition to cardio, women in their 60s should regularly work on their balance and flexibility, which can help reduce your risk of falling which can cause serious injury. Strength training can also help reverse or minimize muscle and bone loss, both of which are common in older women. Other benefits of a well-rounded fitness routine in your 60s include:

- Decreased body fat
- Enhanced cognitive function
- Prevention of chronic health conditions
- Reduced stress
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 – become 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:

- **Regular heart checkups:** See your primary care provider for regular tests to monitor your heart health. Your primary care provider will then refer you to a specialist as needed.

- **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.
Digestive Issues

As you age, your digestive system can slow down and experience other issues. Nearly 40% of people experience age-related digestive symptoms each year. About half of people over 60 have diverticulosis, a condition which affects the colon when small bulging pouches develop. Constipation is also one of the most common issues among older adults, with symptoms including painful bowel movements, infrequent bowel movements, and dry, hard stool. Some factors can increase your risk of digestive issues, including:

- Medications (including many for blood pressure and pain management)
- Inactivity
- Dehydration

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 some topical treatments that can help ease symptoms of urinary incontinence.
Additional Important Screenings

- **Breast cancer:** Experts recommend women ages 45-54 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, and it’s recommended that women have a bone density test at age 65. 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.