
Regular health checks

Summary

- Regular health checks can identify any early signs of health issues.
 - When you have a health check, your doctor will talk with you about your medical history, your family's history of disease and your lifestyle, including your diet, weight, physical activity, alcohol use and whether you smoke.
 - Your doctor may include a general health check when you visit for another reason, such as a cold.
 - Your doctor can tell you how often you need health checks.
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Regular health check-ups can identify any early signs of health issues. Finding problems early means that your chances for effective treatment are increased. Many factors, such as your age, health, family history and lifestyle choices, impact on how often you need check-ups.

Why regular health checks are important

It is a good idea to visit a doctor regularly, even if you feel healthy. The purpose of these visits is to:

- check for current or emerging medical problems
- assess your risk of future medical issues
- prompt you to maintain a healthy lifestyle
- update vaccinations.

Health checks are usually incorporated into routine medical care. Your doctor will often perform these checks when you are visiting for another condition, such as a cold or another problem. Your doctor will then tell you how often you need to have a health check.

Having a health check is also a time to examine your lifestyle to see what improvements can be made. This may be something you regularly do yourself or discuss with a healthcare professional.

Health checks at home

You can do a basic health check at home to review your health in relation to:

- **Alcohol** – people who have at least two alcohol-free days per week and stick to no more than two standard drinks per drinking day have better long-term health.
 - **Dental care** – cleaning your teeth regularly and eating a low-sugar diet can reduce your risk of tooth decay, gum disease and tooth loss. Visit a dentist or other oral health professional at least once a year for a dental examination and professional cleaning, or more frequently as advised by your dentist.
 - **Diet** – a healthy diet improves your general health and wellbeing. Have at least two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables each day.
 - **Physical activity** – regular physical activity is good for your mental health, heart and bones, and can prevent many diseases. Aim for 30 minutes to an hour of moderate physical activity a day. Moderate physical activity takes some effort, but still allows a conversation to be held (for example, brisk walking, gentle swimming, social tennis).
 - **Skin checks** – check your skin regularly for unusual moles or freckles, and see your doctor if you notice anything unusual. People who work outdoors need a yearly examination by their doctor or a dermatologist.
 - **Smoking** – smoking increases your risk of many diseases, including heart disease, stroke, lung disease and thin bones. If you smoke, quitting as soon as possible helps reduce the harm.
 - **Weight** – maintaining a healthy weight range helps prevent longer-term diseases, such as diabetes and
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arthritis.

Regular health checks for adults

Regular health checks can help to identify early warning signs of disease or illness. Heart disease, diabetes and some cancers can often be picked up in their early stages, when treatment may be more successful.

When you have a check, your doctor will talk to you about your medical history, your family's history of disease and your lifestyle. Your diet, weight, how much you exercise, and whether or not you smoke and drink alcohol or take illegal drugs will also be discussed.

If you have high-risk factors, such as a family history of a condition, it may be more likely that you will develop a particular disease. Regular checks may help your doctor pick up early warning signs.

If you have a high risk of a particular health condition, your doctor may recommend more frequent health checks at an earlier age.

These are some common tests, but your doctor may recommend others according to your situation.

Health checks for your heart

Health check-ups for heart disease may include:

- **Blood pressure** – have your blood pressure checked every two years if it is normal, you are aged under 40 years, and there is no family history of high blood pressure. Have it checked yearly if you are over 40, your blood pressure is on the high side, or you have a personal or family history of high blood pressure, stroke or heart attack. Be advised by your doctor.
- **Blood tests** – check cholesterol levels and blood triglycerides, among other things. High levels may indicate an increased risk of various health problems, including heart disease. If you are over 45, you should have these blood tests once every five years. If you are at high risk of heart disease and have a family history, you should be tested every year from the age of 40.
- **Electrocardiogram (ECG)** – this is a non-invasive and painless medical test that detects cardiac (heart) abnormalities by measuring the electrical activity generated by the heart as it contracts.
- **Obesity tests** – being overweight is a significant risk factor for many health conditions, including cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Ask your doctor to check your body mass index (BMI) and waist measurement every two years. If you are at a higher risk, you should have your weight checked more frequently.

Health checks for diabetes

Tests for **diabetes** include a fasting blood sugar level test, which measures the amount of glucose in the blood after fasting (not eating for an amount of time). It is usually done before you have breakfast. Depending on your risk level, you will need to be tested annually or once every three years.

Risk factors for type 2 diabetes include:

- family history of diabetes
- pre-diabetes (slightly elevated blood glucose levels)
- age over 45 years
- overweight or obesity
- high blood pressure
- high blood cholesterol
- smoking
- inactive lifestyle
- history of angina (chest pain), heart attack or stroke
- belonging to certain ethnic groups, including Pacific Islander and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples
- in women, a history of gestational diabetes in pregnancy

- in women, a history of polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS).

Health checks for bowel cancer

The faecal occult blood test (FOBT) uses chemicals to check a bowel motion sample for blood, which may be a sign of **bowel cancer**. If you are over 50, you should have this test once every two years, or after you turn 40 if you have a family history.

People at high risk of bowel cancer may need a colonoscopy every five years. During this test, the doctor inserts a slender instrument called a colonoscope through the anus to visually check the rectum and large bowel for any abnormalities.

Health checks for eye conditions

Eyesight tends to deteriorate with age. Serious **eye conditions** such as glaucoma, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy and macular degeneration are more common with age.

People older than 65 years should have an annual examination. However, more frequent testing may be recommended for those with certain risk factors, such as:

- a family history of eye disease
- a personal history of eye disease or injury
- certain medical conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes
- taking certain medications.

If you already wear prescription glasses or contact lenses, you should have your eyes tested every year. Adults who do not wear prescription glasses or contact lenses should have an eye test every two years.

Health checks for your bones

Advancing age is a significant risk factor for **osteoporosis** in both men and women. A bone density test helps to determine the health of your bones. Generally speaking, people over the age of 50 should be assessed for the need to have a bone density test.

Health checks for women

In order to stay in good health and identify possible health issues at an early stage, it is important for women to have regular health checks. There are a number of specific tests that you should make part of your regular routine.

Breast cancer screening

It's recommended that women between the ages of 50–69 years attend the Breast Screen Australia Program every two years for screening **mammograms**. There is no evidence that clinical examination or self-examination offers any health benefits to women.

Cervical Screening Test

The Pap test has been replaced with a new Cervical Screening Test (CST) every five years. The CST is safe, more accurate and detects **human papilloma virus** (HPV) infection, the main cause of cervical cancer. Your first CST is due at 25 years of age or two years after your last Pap test. If your result is normal you will be due in five years to have your next test. Even if you have been vaccinated against HPV, you should continue to have regular screening as the vaccine doesn't protect against all types of HPV infection known to cause cervical cancer. Have any questions? We recommend speaking to your healthcare provider.

For more details, you can call **13 15 56** or visit the **Cancer Screening website**.

STI screening

If you are sexually active, you should get tested for chlamydia every year between the ages of 15 and 29, using a simple urine test. **Chlamydia** is very common and does not always show symptoms. If you are at risk of other sexually transmissible infections, such as **HIV/AIDS** or **herpes**, ask your doctor about further testing.

Pregnancy

You should have a general check-up before becoming pregnant to discuss any health risks during **pregnancy**. Once you are pregnant, regular antenatal checks help monitor your baby's development, pick up abnormalities and assess your health.

Tests related to pregnancy may include ultrasound scans, urine tests, blood tests and genetic testing. Some antenatal tests are recommended for all pregnant women, while others are only necessary for women at increased risk of complications. Be advised by your doctor.

Health checks for men

It's a good idea to make regular health checks part of your regular routine. This will help you stay healthy and pick up potential problems early.

Health checks for prostate cancer

Discuss testing with your doctor. It is not recommended that all men are routinely tested for **prostate cancer**. You will need to consider the benefits, risks and uncertainties of testing, as well as your risk of developing the disease.

Health checks for older people

As you get older, keeping an eye on your health becomes more important. Speak to your doctor about:

- abdominal aortic aneurysm screening – former and current smokers (particularly older men) can consider having an ultrasound to screen for abdominal aortic aneurysms, a blood-filled bulge in a major blood vessel in your abdomen called the aorta
- blood pressure screening – every year. If you have diabetes, heart disease, kidney problems, or certain other conditions, you may need to be checked more often
- bowel cancer screening – a simple test for signs of bowel cancer is recommended once every two years if you are over 50
- cholesterol screening and heart disease prevention – every five years if levels are normal. If you have high cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease, kidney problems or certain other conditions, you may need to be checked more often
- diabetes screening – every three years. If you are overweight and have other risk factors for diabetes, ask your doctor if you should be screened more often
- lung cancer screening – for current smokers and those who have quit within the past 15 years
- osteoporosis screening – if you have risk factors for osteoporosis, you should check with your doctor about screening. Risk factors can include long-term steroid use, low body weight, smoking, heavy alcohol use or a family history of osteoporosis
- a physical exam – every year or as recommended by your doctor. Your doctor will check and record your weight, height and body mass index (BMI).

You should also speak with your doctor about immunisation, in particular:

- a pneumococcal vaccine if you have never had one, or if it has been more than five years since you had the vaccine
- an annual flu shot
- a tetanus-diphtheria-pertussis booster every 10 years
- a shingles or herpes zoster vaccine.

Check-ups with other health professionals may include:

- a dental exam – every year or so, or more often if recommended by your dentist.
- an eye test – every one to two years if you have vision problems or glaucoma risk
- a hearing test – if you have symptoms of hearing loss.

Other health checks

Your GP may also recommend other tests based on your family history, your medical history or current symptoms.

Depending on the results of those tests, your doctor may then want to provide a course of treatment, investigate further or refer you to a specialist for diagnosis and treatment.

Where to get help

- Your general practitioner (GP)
- National Cervical Screening Program
- Your community health clinic

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Department of Health and Human Services

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