
Health checks for women

Summary

- See your GP for regular medical check-ups.
 - Screening tests help GPs to detect many diseases, such as cardiovascular (heart) disease, diabetes and some cancers in their early stages.
 - Women at high risk of a particular disease should be regularly tested.
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Women are recommended to have a general check-up with their GP every year. Part of the check-up will involve talking to your doctor about your medical history, your family's history of disease and your lifestyle choices, such as diet, exercise habits and whether or not you smoke or drink alcohol.

Seeing your doctor for regular medical check-ups will help you stay healthy and pick up early warning signs of disease or illness. Many diseases such as cardiovascular (heart) disease, diabetes and some cancers can be picked up in their early stages, when treatment is often more effective.

If you are at high risk of a particular disease – for example, if you have a family history of it – it is recommended that you get checked more frequently, and at an earlier age.

Self-checking health checks for women

Make self-checking part of your regular routine. Things you can check at home include:

- skin – monitor freckles, moles and skin blemishes for changes in size, shape or colour or anything unusual such as pain or itch. See your doctor if you notice anything unusual. **Women at high risk of skin cancer** need regular examination by their doctor or dermatologist
- dental care – you can reduce your risk of tooth decay, gum disease and tooth loss if you clean your teeth regularly, drink fluoridated water, eat a low-sugar diet, and visit the dentist at least once a year
- diet – you can improve your general health by eating a variety of nutritious healthy foods, and having regular meals and a healthy eating plan
- weight – maintaining a healthy weight can prevent chronic diseases such as diabetes and arthritis
- alcohol – 'low risk' drinking is defined as no more than two standard drinks (for example, 100 ml of wine) on any day and at least two alcohol-free days per week
- smoking – increases your risk of many diseases including heart disease, stroke, lung disease and osteoporosis (loss of bone strength). If you smoke, try to quit. There is no safe smoking level
- exercise – regular exercise can prevent diseases developing, as well as being good for your emotional health. At least 2.5 hours of exercise per week is recommended
- mental and emotional health – if you are experiencing symptoms such as intense sadness, irritability, fatigue, anxiety, or have had changes to your eating or sleeping habits, see your doctor to discuss these symptoms.

Intimate partner violence is one of the biggest impacts on women's health. If you are experiencing family violence don't have someone to talk to, please call **1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)**.

Cervical Screening Tests, STI screening and pregnancy check-ups for women

Health checks from your GP can include:

- **Cervical Screening Test** – This is an important screening test to pick up signs of irregularities that could lead to cervical cancer if not treated. Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers. As of December 2017, the Pap test has been replaced by the Cervical Screening Test, which detects human papillomavirus (HPV)

Cervical Screening Tests are necessary if you have ever been sexually active. Your first Cervical Screening Test should be two years after your last Pap test. You will be invited to have your Cervical Screening Test when you are due to participate, via the National Cancer Screening Register. It is recommended that you have the test every **five** years until you are 74. Even if you have had the HPV vaccine, it is important to continue to have regular Cervical Screening Tests

- **STI screening** – if you are under 30 years of age and sexually active, have a urine test for **chlamydia** each year, as **chlamydia** can affect your fertility and often has no symptoms. If you have sex with one or more new partners without a condom, it is recommended that you talk to your doctor about checking for other **sexually transmissible infections**
- **pregnancy check-up** – have a general check-up before planning a pregnancy to discuss any pregnancy health risks. Once you are pregnant, regular antenatal checks help monitor your baby's development, pick up abnormalities and assess your health. Tests include ultrasound scans, urine tests and blood tests.

Heart health checks for women

Health checks for heart disease may include:

- **blood pressure** – have your **blood pressure** checked every two years after the age of 18. If your blood pressure is on the high side, or you have a personal or family history of high blood pressure, stroke or heart attack, it's best to have it checked more frequently
- **blood tests** – check your cholesterol levels and triglycerides. High levels may indicate an increased risk of heart disease. If you're over 45, it is recommended that you have these blood tests once every five years. If you're at high risk of cardiovascular disease, it is recommended that you be tested every year or two
- **weight check** – 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.

Diabetes health checks for women

A common test for **diabetes** is the fasting blood sugar level test. This involves measuring the amount of glucose in your blood after you haven't eaten for eight hours. Depending on your risk level, you will need to be tested every one to three years.

You are at higher risk of type 2 diabetes if you:

- are over 45 years old and obese (BMI over 30)
- had gestational diabetes during a pregnancy
- have polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS)
- have a family history of diabetes
- are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander aged over 35 years
- belong to certain ethnic groups – including Pacific Islander and Sri Lankan.

Breast cancer health checks for women

If you notice any breast changes, be sure to visit your GP within the next week.

Women aged between 50 and 74 years who have no personal or family history of breast cancer are recommended to have a **screening mammogram** (breast X-ray) every two years.

If you have a personal or family history of breast cancer, your doctor can help you to decide how often you need to be screened.

Eye health checks for women

Eyesight tends to deteriorate with age.

It is recommended that all women have an eye health check for glaucoma by the age of 40. (Glaucoma is a serious eye condition characterised by high fluid pressure within the eyeball.)

It is recommended that all women with a strong family history of glaucoma (first-degree relative) have their first eye health check 5–10 years earlier than the age at which their relative developed glaucoma.

If no glaucoma is found, it is then recommended that women have regular eye health checks from the age of 40 (for people of African descent), or 50 (for people of Caucasian and Asian descent).

Women at increased risk of glaucoma include those:

- with a strong family history of glaucoma
- of African, Asian and Caucasian descent.

Women at higher risk of glaucoma include those aged 50 and over with:

- diabetes
- myopia
- prior eye injury
- high blood pressure
- long-term steroid use
- migraine and peripheral vasospasm.

It is also recommended that:

- women aged between 50 and 65 have a general eye examination every two years
- women aged over 65 have an eye examination once a year.

Bowel cancer health checks for women

Bowel cancer is a common cancer and, if detected early, has a good recovery rate. A **faecal occult blood test (FOBT)** is used to screen for **bowel cancer**. It tests for blood in your stool (poo), which may be a sign of bowel cancer (or of other, unrelated things). If a positive result is returned, a follow-up test such as a colonoscopy will be recommended.

Faecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT)

The FOBT is used to check a stool (poo) sample for blood. You can collect the sample yourself, at home, using an FOBT kit.

The **National Bowel Cancer Screening Program** recommends that women between 50 and 74 years of age have an FOBT once every two years.

By 2020, the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program will send a free kit to people (in the mail) every two years from when they turn 50. The program is being phased in over a few years, so people will receive a kit at a variety of eligible ages in 2018 and 2019, during the phasing-in period.

To have a kit sent to you at other times, you can:

- buy a kit from the **Cancer Council** Tel. 13 11 20
- talk to your GP
- talk to your pharmacist
- check whether your health insurer provides them, or provides a rebate for a purchased kit.

Colonoscopy

Women with a family history of **bowel cancer**, or who are otherwise at high risk, may need a colonoscopy every two to five years.

When having a colonoscopy, you are given light sedation and the doctor inserts a slender instrument called a colonoscope through the anus to visually check your rectum and large bowel for any abnormalities.

Bone density health checks for women

Osteoporosis is a disease that causes bones to become brittle. This happens when they lose minerals (such as calcium) more quickly than the body can replace them. Bones become less dense, lose strength and break more easily. A bone density test (DEXA) helps to determine the health of your bones.

Bone density testing is most often used when people have:

- osteoporosis or concerns about osteoporosis (such as family history)
- risk factors for osteoporosis – including a thin build, early menopause, long times with no periods when younger, age over 70 years, long-term use of cortisone medication
- spinal deformity with stooped posture
- previous fracture, caused by a minor trauma such as a fall from a standing height.

Immunisation for women

It is recommended that young women have the vaccine for the **human papillomavirus (HPV)** before becoming sexually active, to prevent **cervical cancer**.

Check that your childhood immunisations are up to date and whether you need any boosters, such as tetanus.

It is recommended that you have a flu vaccination if you:

- are over 65 years of age
- are pregnant – especially in the last trimester, because your baby will also be protected
- have a chronic condition such as severe asthma or diabetes
- are worried that you are likely to get the flu and it would impact significantly on you.

Other health tests for women

You may need other regular tests not listed here, depending on your personal or family medical history. Ask your GP for further information.

Where to get help

- Your GP
- Dentist
- Eye specialist
- Pharmacist
- **Cancer Council Victoria** Tel. 13 11 20

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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