Cancer Screening

What is cancer screening?

Cancer screening tests can help find cancer before symptoms appear. When cancer is found early, it may be easier to treat or cure. For example, a small breast cancer may be seen on a mammogram up to 2 years before it can be felt.

There are different types of cancer screening tests:

Physical exam

Several different kinds of physical exams can check for signs of possible cancer:

- You can do self-exams to check for problems such as lumps or tender areas. Women should do breast self-exams, and men should do testicular self-exams. Everyone should check his or her skin regularly.
- Your provider will examine you to check for lumps, moles, discharge, or anything else that seems unusual. Your provider will also ask about your health habits, such as smoking, diet, and exercise, alcohol use, and about your past illnesses and treatments. Women may also have a pelvic exam and a Pap test to check for cancer of the cervix.
- A colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy uses a thin, flexible, lighted tube that is put into your rectum to look for cancer and polyps in your colon. This test is usually done in people between 50 and 75 years of age.

Laboratory tests

Several kinds of tests are used to check samples of blood, urine, or tissue in different parts of your body.

- Blood tests can find signs of cancer in the liver or prostate.
- Urine tests may be used to check for abnormal cells in your bladder or kidney.
- A biopsy is the removal of a small sample of tissue for testing. Biopsies may be used to check for many kinds of cancer.

Imaging tests

Many kinds of imaging tests are used to diagnose cancer. Imaging tests make pictures of areas inside your body. For example, you may have:

- A chest X-ray to look for lung cancer
- A mammogram to screen for breast cancer
- A CT scan, which uses X-rays and a computer to show detailed pictures of the part of your body where you may have cancer.
- An MRI uses a strong magnetic field and radio waves to show detailed pictures of the part of your body where you may have cancer.

Genetic tests

Genetic tests check cells from a sample of your blood. These tests look for genes linked to certain cancers. Genes are in each cell of your body and contain the information that tells your body how to develop and work. Genes are passed from

parents to children. For example, if you have a family history of breast or ovarian cancer, you may have inherited genes that put you at high risk. If genetic tests show that you have these genes, you may want to be checked for the cancers often so that they can be found early.

Are screening tests accurate?

Cancer screening tests can be very helpful, but they are not perfect. Test results are only one part of a larger picture that takes into account your medical history and current health. Sometimes a test needs to be repeated to check the first result. You may also need different tests. Talk to your healthcare provider about your result and ask:

- If you need more tests
- What kind of treatment you might need
- When you need to be tested again
- What lifestyle, diet, or other changes you might need to make

Which screening tests should I have?

See your healthcare provider regularly for checkups. Ask your provider which cancer screening tests you need and how often you need them. Which tests you should have and the timing of these tests depends on your personal and family history. You should understand risks and benefits of screening tests. You have the right to make decisions about your healthcare and to give permission for any tests or procedures.

For more information, contact:

- American Cancer Society, Inc.
  800-227-2345
  http://www.cancer.org
- National Cancer Institute
  800-422-6237 (TTY: 800-332-8615)
  http://www.cancer.gov

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