

Routine Healthcare for Women

Routine checkups can find treatable problems early. For many medical problems, early treatment can help prevent more serious problems. The value of checkups and how often you have them depends mainly on your age. Your personal and family medical histories are also important. This summary of routine checkups is intended for people who are feeling healthy and not having any symptoms of illness.

If you are having any symptoms that you think may mean a problem, do not wait for your next regular checkup to see your healthcare provider. Get it taken care of right away.

What needs to be checked and how often?

The tests listed below are recommended for routine healthcare by the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) or the American Academy of Family Practice (AAFP). They are the minimum checkup recommendations. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about how often you should have a physical exam and how often you need these or other tests.

- **Weight:** At least once a year, preferably each time you visit your provider
- **Blood pressure measurement:** At least yearly for all women
- **Clinical breast exam by your provider:** At least every 3 years if you are 20 to 39 years old. Get an exam every year if you are 40 or older.
- **Mammogram:** As often as your healthcare provider recommends based on your personal and family history for breast cancer. When you should start having these exams and how often depends on your risk for breast cancer. Breast cancer screening guidelines released by USPSTF in 2009 recommend a mammogram every 2 years for women 50 to 74 years old. Some women with a high risk of breast cancer may need to start screening earlier. Some may need to be screened every year. Ask your provider how often you should have a mammogram.
- **Pelvic exam** by your healthcare provider: Every year if you are 21 years old or older. You may need a pelvic exam at other times if you are having problems.
- **Pap and HPV tests:** As often as your provider recommends if you are 21 or older. You should have a Pap test to check for cervical cancer and precancer changes at least every 3 years until you are 65. If you are 30 years old or older, a test may be done at the same time as the Pap test to check for the virus called HPV. HPV can cause cervical cancer. After age 30 your provider may suggest combining a Pap test with an HPV test every 5 years. You may need more frequent tests if there are things that put you at a higher risk for cervical cancer or if you have had abnormal test results. Ask your healthcare provider about this. If you are over 65 years old, ask your provider if you can stop having Pap and HPV tests.
- **Cholesterol test.** At least every 5 years. You will need more frequent testing if you have abnormal results.

- **Blood sugar test for type 2 diabetes:** At least once a year if your blood pressure, blood lipids (cholesterol), or weight are high or you have a family history of type 2 diabetes
- **Colorectal cancer screening:** With 1 of these 3 methods of screening if you are 50 to 75 years old and have an average risk of colon cancer:
 - A fecal occult blood test once a year to check for blood in your stool (bowel movement)
 - A sigmoidoscopy exam every 5 years with fecal occult blood testing at least every 3 years between the 5-year exams
 - A colonoscopy every 10 years

A special X-ray test called a barium enema may be done every 5 years instead of colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy. While there is no evidence that this test is as effective as the tests listed above, it may be the best choice for some people.

You may need to start colorectal cancer screening earlier if you have a higher risk of colon cancer. Talk to your healthcare provider about this.

- **Chlamydia test:** Every year if you are sexually active and under 25 or if you have a high risk of sexually transmitted disease (STD)
- **Gonorrhea and syphilis tests:** If you are at high risk for these sexually transmitted infections (STIs)—for example, you have a history of STIs, a new sex partner, or more than 1 sex partner
- **HIV test for the AIDS virus:** Every time your blood is drawn for other routine blood tests if you are 15 to 65 years old and at least every year if you have a high risk for HIV infection. Younger teens and older adults who are at increased risk should also be screened.
- **Tuberculosis (TB) test:** Every year if you have a high risk of TB; for example, because:
 - You are a health worker, drug user, or immigrant.
 - You have diabetes, HIV, or another condition that weakens your immune system.
 - You have close contact with someone infected with TB.
- **Bone density test** for osteoporosis: At age 65 years if your risk is normal and at 60 if you have a high risk (for example, because you smoke or do not get regular exercise). Osteoporosis is a disease that thins and weakens bones to the point where they break easily.
- **Hearing test:** If you are 65 or older
- **Vision test:** If you are 65 or older
- **Skin:** If you have any moles or abnormal areas of skin you would like your provider to check
- **Mouth:** Every year for dental problems and for sores of the gums, especially if you smoke, chew tobacco, wear dentures, or have a medical condition that can be made worse by problems with the teeth or gums, such as diabetes or heart disease

You may need other tests as well. You and your healthcare provider need to talk about what is right for you based on your symptoms and your personal and family medical history.

What shots do I need?

Get the shots your healthcare provider recommends for you. They may include vaccines against:

- Tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis
- Flu
- HPV (human papillomavirus) through age 26
- MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella)
- Hepatitis A
- Hepatitis B
- Pneumococcal disease
- Chickenpox
- Shingles

What other things I can do to stay healthy?

Your healthcare provider will likely suggest additional ways to stay healthy. Some of these may include:

- **Breast self-exams:** Ask your healthcare provider about doing breast self-exams. These exams are not as strongly recommended as they used to be. However, your provider may recommend doing them to help you be more familiar with your body. They could help you notice changes that need to be checked for breast cancer.
- **Substance use:** Don't use tobacco or illegal drugs. Don't use alcohol during activities such as driving, swimming, boating, and operating machinery. Limit your alcohol to no more than 1 drink a day.
- **Diet and exercise:** Try to keep your weight at a comfortable, healthy level. Limit unhealthy fats and cholesterol in your diet. Choose healthy fats, such as olive oil. Eat whole grains, and at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Get regular exercise according to your healthcare provider's recommendation.
- **Injury prevention:** Use lap and shoulder belts when you drive. Use a helmet when you ride a motorcycle or bicycle. If you are around guns or other firearms, practice safe handling. Make sure to keep all firearms unloaded and in locked cabinets when they are not in use. Install smoke detectors in your home. Set your hot water heater to less than 120°F (49°C). Prevent falls by removing unsafe rugs and keeping stairs and handrails in good repair. Cover slippery surfaces, such as outside steps, with nonskid surfaces.
- **Dental health:** Visit your dentist regularly. Brush your teeth with fluoride toothpaste daily. Also floss your teeth daily.

- **Sexual behavior:** Prevent sexually transmitted infections by avoiding high-risk sexual behavior. Use latex or polyurethane condoms every time you have sexual contact unless you are in a long-term relationship with just 1 person who is not having sex with anyone else.
- **Hormone use:** During or after menopause, discuss the risks and benefits of use of estrogen and progesterone replacement with your healthcare provider.

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