

A REGULAR CHECKUP COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE

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Between work, family, and personal commitments, most women barely have time to grab their car keys in the morning—much less fit another appointment into an already packed schedule. But one meeting has an undeniable payoff: Making time for a health checkup now could add years to your life. Regular checkups can detect cancer early or even prevent it altogether. For example, the number of cervical cancer deaths in the US dropped by 74% between 1955 and 1992—largely because women began getting regular Pap tests.

To reap these health benefits, however, it's important to get checkups on a schedule recommended by your doctor. National Women's Health Week (NWHW) in May can serve as yearly reminders to check with your doctor about when to schedule an office visit. Follow the guidelines below for which cancer detection tests you'll need as you grow older. A woman's risk for cancer does not decrease over her lifetime, as many women believe. Young women think they have a high risk for cancer, and many believe this risk drops as they grow older. In fact, for most women's cancers, it's the opposite.

The American Cancer Society recommends that women get checked for cancer during a regular checkup. A thorough cancer screening should include any of the necessary early detection tests listed below, as well as physical examinations for cancers of the skin, thyroid, mouth, lymph nodes and ovaries. Review the list below for the cancer-related exams and tests you'll need, depending on your age and medical history.

Physical exams: A cancer-related checkup should include an examination of your entire body for early signs of skin cancer, as well as specific exams for cancers of the thyroid, mouth, ovaries and lymph nodes.

Breast cancer: Women 40 or older should have a mammogram and clinical breast exam every year, while women between the ages of 20-39 need a clinical breast exam about every 3 years. Breast self-exam (BSE) is an option for women starting in their 20s. Women at increased risk (such as those with a family history, genetic tendency or past breast cancer) should talk with their doctors about the benefits and limitations of starting mammography screening earlier, having additional tests (such as breast ultrasound or MRI), or having more frequent exams.

Cervical cancer: Cervical cancer screening should begin about 3 years after a woman begins having vaginal intercourse, but no later than 21 years of age. It should be done every year with regular Pap tests or every 2 years using liquid-based Pap tests. At or after age 30, women who have had three normal test results in a row may get screened every 2 or 3 years. A doctor may suggest getting the test more often if a woman has certain risk factors such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection or a weakened immune system. Women 70 years of age and older who have had three or more normal Pap tests and no abnormal Pap tests in the last 10 years may choose to stop cervical cancer screening.

Ovarian cancer: Regular pelvic and rectal exams are important for detecting ovarian cancer as early as possible.

Colon cancer: All women 50 or older need to follow one of these five testing schedules: Yearly fecal occult blood test (FOBT), flexible sigmoidoscopy every 5 years, yearly FOBT and flexible sigmoidoscopy every 5 years (preferred over either option alone), double contrast barium enema every 5 years or a colonoscopy every 10 years.

Experts recommend keeping a written list of questions and any suspected symptoms to mention during your visit. If there are questions you're uncomfortable asking aloud, just hand your list to your doctor. No one knows your body better than you do. Become a partner with your doctor and take control of your health. You'll be glad you did.