

The 10 Screenings Women Should Know





Introduction

Health screenings are medical tests, clinical exams, or imaging scans that doctors use to check for certain diseases and health conditions. Health screenings are typically done before there are any signs or symptoms and are repeated on a regular basis. **While health screenings cannot usually prevent a disease, such as cancer, they can help identify abnormalities or problems early when they may be easiest to treat.**

Receiving recommended health screenings on a regular basis is one of the most important things you can do to be proactive about your health. In fact, **regular health screenings may even save your life by detecting a health issue or problem early.**

This resource is intended to reduce the mystery surrounding women's health screenings by clearly explaining 10 important health screenings women should know about, detailing what they consist of, who should receive them, and when they should be received. We hope this guide is helpful to you as you continue to discuss screenings with your healthcare team.

Disclaimer: Every individual has their own unique set of circumstances and risk factors for developing diseases and health conditions. The screenings listed in this guide are recommended for women living in the United States. The information in this guide is not intended as medical advice and should be used only as a general guideline for women's health screenings. Always consult with your doctor or healthcare professional about your personal risk factors and the screening schedule that is best for you.











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Common Women's Health Screenings

There are many diseases and conditions that can be screened for, ranging from high cholesterol to certain types of cancer. Below are 10 common health screenings women should know about to make informed decisions about their health.

Click [here](#) to download this screenings chart to print and display as a reminder.

| Health Screening | Who Needs It | Why You Need It |
|---|--|--|
|  Well-Woman Exam | Women 18+ | Preventative check-up for overall health and women's health issues |
|  Breast Cancer Screening | Women 40+* | Mammograms can identify breast cancer at its earliest stage when it is easiest to treat |
|  Cervical Cancer Screening | Women 21+* | Helps detect abnormal cervical cells before they become cancer |
|  Colorectal Cancer Screening | Women 45+* | Can prevent colorectal cancer by identifying precancerous polyps so they can be removed |
|  Lung Cancer Screening | Women 50+* who are at high risk | Helps detect lung cancer at an early stage when it is easiest to treat |
|  Skin Cancer Screening | Women at high risk* | Helps detect and identify skin cancer for removal and treatment |
|  Cholesterol Screening | Women 40+* (can begin in 20s) | Looks for elevated cholesterol levels in the blood, which carries an increased risk of heart attack and stroke |
|  Blood Pressure Screening | Women 18+* (especially those at high risk) | Checks for high blood pressure, which can lead to heart attack or stroke |
|  Diabetes Screening | Women with risk factors* | Checks for diabetes and pre-diabetes before symptoms can appear |
|  Bone Density Screening | Women 60+* | Measures bone strength and density to identify signs of osteoporosis or osteopenia |

*Certain factors determine how early and often women should receive these screenings. Family history, personal cancer history, gene mutations, or other increased risk factors can impact the need for these screenings. Consult a doctor for more information.



Well-Woman Exam

What is a well-woman exam?

A well-woman exam is a yearly check-up with your primary care provider (PCP) or gynecologist (OBGYN). This exam focuses specifically on women's health issues and preventative care. At a well-woman exam, you will likely receive a:

- General physical exam to assess your overall health
- [Clinical breast exam](#) to visually and manually inspect the breasts for lumps or other abnormalities
- Pelvic exam, which is a physical exam of the internal reproductive organs of the pelvis, such as the ovaries, fallopian tubes, uterus, vagina, and cervix, to make sure the organs are healthy
- Pap smear to check cervical health and screen for cervical cancer (a Pap smear is not always included in a well-woman exam and may need to be scheduled as a separate screening)

Why you need it:

The focus of this exam is preventative care, meaning it can catch a medical issue before it becomes more serious or symptoms appear. As one of the only screenings recommended for younger women, it is important to prioritize this screening every year.

Who needs one:

All women ages 18 and over should receive a well-woman exam every year.

Keep in mind:

- A Pap smear to screen for [cervical cancer](#) is sometimes included in a well-woman exam, depending on the patient's age.
- During this appointment, your doctor can also give you referrals for other screenings you may need, such as a mammogram.



Breast Cancer Screening

What is a breast cancer screening?

A breast cancer screening is typically performed through a mammogram. A [mammogram](#) is an x-ray of the breasts that allows a qualified specialist to examine the breast tissue for any abnormalities or suspicious areas. In a mammogram, the breasts are exposed to a small amount of radiation to produce an image of the breast tissue.

Why you need it:

Routine mammogram screening is the gold standard for women of average risk to identify breast cancer at its earliest stage when it is easiest to treat.

Who needs one:

- **All women ages 40 and over** should receive a screening mammogram every year.
- Women with a family history of breast cancer, carry a [breast cancer gene mutation](#), or have other increased [risk factors](#) may need to begin mammogram screenings before the age of 40. These woman may also need additional types of imaging, such as a breast MRI. Speak with your doctor about the screening schedule that is right for you.

Keep in mind:

- A mammogram may cause slight discomfort for a few seconds as tight pressure is applied to make the breast as thin as possible. But this pressure will yield the most accurate results.
- To learn more about mammograms, download the free eBook, [Mammogram 101](#).
- If you need help scheduling or affording a mammogram, read [How to Schedule a Mammogram](#).



Cervical Cancer Screening

What is a cervical cancer screening?

A cervical cancer screening uses a Pap smear, or Pap test, to screen for abnormal cells located in the cervix. This screening also often includes a human papillomavirus (HPV) test since HPV can lead to cervical cancer. In both the Pap smear and HPV test, cells are taken from the cervix during a pelvic exam and examined under a microscope to check for the presence of cancerous cells.

Why you need it:

It can take 3-7 years for abnormal cervical cells to become cancer. Regular cervical cancer screenings through Pap and HPV tests can detect these changes well before the cells become cancerous, allowing for early treatment if necessary.

Who needs one:

- **All women ages 21 to 29** should have a Pap smear alone every 3-5 years.
- **All women ages 30 to 65** should have a Pap smear and HPV test every 3-5 years.

- Women who have had their cervix removed through a hysterectomy may still need cervical cancer screening. Consult with your doctor for the screening schedule that is right for you.

Keep in mind:

- The Pap and HPV test is quick, usually taking about 5 seconds during the pelvic exam. Trying to relax your pelvis during the exam will make it easier and quicker.
- Long-term birth control use may increase cervical cancer risk. Women on birth control medication should be diligent about scheduling this annual screening.



Colorectal Cancer Screening

What is a colorectal cancer screening?

Colorectal cancer is cancer that starts in the colon or the rectum. Colorectal cancer screening refers to tests to check for precancerous polyps (abnormal growths) or colorectal cancer before symptoms appear. The two most common types of colorectal cancer screenings are a stool sample test and a colonoscopy.

Why you need it:

This is the only cancer screening that can actually prevent cancer. It looks for precancerous polyps in the colon so they can be removed before they turn into cancer. It can also detect colorectal cancer early when it is easiest to treat.

Who needs one:

- **Women ages 45 and over** at average risk of colorectal cancer should receive regular colorectal screenings, either through a stool sample test or colonoscopy. If

there are no polyps found inside the colon, you likely won't need another screening for 10 years.

- **Women with an increased risk of developing colorectal cancer** may need to begin screenings earlier than age 45 and receive them more often. Risk factors for colorectal cancer include a strong family history of colorectal cancer or colon polyps, personal history of colorectal cancer, personal history of irritable bowel disease (IBS), and a personal history of radiation to the abdomen, such as to treat a prior cancer.

Keep in mind:

- Preparation for a colonoscopy involves following the doctor's instructions to clean out your bowel the day before the procedure.
- A colonoscopy is performed under anesthesia and lasts about 20 minutes to an hour. If polyps are found, they will likely be removed during the colonoscopy procedure, potentially lengthening the time required.



Lung Cancer Screening

What is a lung cancer screening?

A lung cancer screening is a test to look for the presence of cancer in the lungs. A lung cancer screening usually consists of a low-dose computed tomography (CT) scan of the chest.

Why you need it:

The goal of lung cancer screening is to detect lung cancer at a very early stage when it's easiest to treat. Individuals at higher risk of developing lung cancer include long-term smokers and those exposed to secondhand smoke.

Who needs one:

A yearly lung cancer screening is recommended for individuals who:

- Have smoked an average of one pack or more of cigarettes per day for a year or longer **and**
- Smoke now or have quit within the last 15 years **and**
- Are between 50 and 80 years old

Keep in mind:

- Lung cancer screening in the form of a CT scan is quick and doesn't hurt.
- Not everyone needs a lung cancer screening. However, those at high risk for developing lung cancer, such as long-term smokers and those exposed to secondhand smoke, should discuss a lung cancer screening schedule with their doctor.



Skin Cancer Screening

What is a skin cancer screening?

A skin cancer screening uses a bright light to visually inspect the skin to check for signs of skin cancer.

Why you need it:

Not everyone will need regular skin cancer screenings. However, those with a personal or family history of skin cancer, or who have other skin cancer risk factors, should discuss screening with their doctor or dermatologist.

Who needs one:

- **Women with symptoms of skin cancer**, such as abnormal moles, birthmarks, or other pigmented areas of the skin, particularly those that change in color, size, shape, or texture, should discuss skin cancer screening with their doctor or dermatologist.
- **Women with a family history of skin cancer or who have previously had skin cancer themselves** should discuss a screening schedule with their doctor or dermatologist.

Keep in mind:

- Healthy individuals with no symptoms, family history, or personal history of skin cancer should not need regular skin cancer screenings.
- Low-risk individuals can perform their own monthly [skin self-exams](#), reporting any changes to their doctor.



Cholesterol Screening

What is a cholesterol screening?

A cholesterol screening, or lipid panel, is a blood test that measures the amount of cholesterol and triglycerides in the blood. This test can help determine your risk of developing coronary artery disease, heart attack, and stroke.

Why you need it:

Because high cholesterol usually causes no symptoms, this screening is important to determine if your cholesterol is elevated above the normal range. Knowing this can lead to earlier lifestyle modifications and treatment, if needed, before serious complications develop.

Who needs one:

- **Women ages 20 to 55** should be screened every 5 years.
- **Women ages 55 to 65** should be screened every 1-2 years.
- **Women over 65** should receive a cholesterol screening every year.
- More frequent testing beginning at an earlier age may be necessary if you have risk factors for coronary artery disease, such as a family history of high cholesterol, are overweight, have diabetes, or smoke. Talk to your doctor about the screening schedule that is right for you.

Keep in mind:

- Cholesterol screening is quick and easy, consisting of a blood draw that is sent to a lab for testing.
- If your cholesterol is normal at age 40, your doctor may recommend more time in between screenings.
- If you have a significant family history of high cholesterol, your doctor may recommend your cholesterol be checked every year during your well-woman exam, regardless of your age.



Blood Pressure Screening

What is a blood pressure screening?

A blood pressure screening measures how hard your heart is working to pump blood through your body. This test is performed by wrapping a cuff around one of your arms and inflating it with air, then slowly releasing the air over the course of about a minute.

Why you need it:

Almost half of all adults in the United States have high blood pressure. High blood pressure increases your risk for serious health problems, including stroke and heart attack.

Who needs one:

Women ages 18 and over should have their blood pressure checked regularly at each wellness visit. Those at high risk for developing high blood pressure should have their blood pressure checked more often. People at risk for high blood pressure include those who are:

- African American
- Overweight or obese
- Currently pregnant or had high blood pressure when previously pregnant
- Sedentary, not doing physical exercise
- Drink too much alcohol
- Smoke
- Don't have a healthy diet
- Have kidney failure, diabetes, or other types of heart disease

Keep in mind:

- Blood pressure screening is quick and easy and can be performed at your annual well-woman exam or physical.
- It is possible to check your own blood pressure at home using an over-the-counter blood pressure cuff. Ask your doctor if self-screening is recommended for you and what type of cuff they recommend for home use.
- Those at risk for developing high blood pressure should have their blood pressure checked more than once a year. Speak with your doctor about the screening schedule that is right for you.



Diabetes Screening

What is a diabetes screening?

A diabetes screening is a blood test that measures the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood to determine if someone has diabetes or is at risk of developing diabetes, called pre-diabetes.

Why you need it:

Pre-diabetes is a condition that increases the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. Catching pre-diabetes early, before symptoms appear, can help prevent or delay type 2 diabetes or other serious health conditions, such as kidney damage, nerve damage, vision loss, or heart disease.

Who needs one:

Women with risk factors for diabetes should ask their doctor about screening. Risk factors for diabetes include:

- **Being 45 years old or older**
- Being overweight or obese
- Having a parent or sibling with type 2 diabetes
- Having ever had gestational diabetes (diabetes while pregnant)
- Being African American, Hispanic or Latino, American Indian, or Alaska Native

Keep in mind:

- Pre-diabetes often does not cause any symptoms. That's why those with risk factors are encouraged to get screened, even without showing symptoms.



Bone Density Screening

What is a bone density screening?

A bone density screening, also called a bone density test (DXA or previously DEXA), is a way to check your bone health. A bone density test measures the strength and mineral content of the bones to screen for osteoporosis, osteopenia, and other conditions that may weaken the bones.

Why you need it:

Knowing your bone density and whether you have bone loss, indicating osteopenia or osteoporosis, can help your doctor determine what treatments, if any, are required to treat and strengthen the bones. Additionally, certain cancer treatment medications and hormone suppressants, including those used to treat breast cancer, can cause bone weakening or bone loss, making this screening particularly important for cancer patients and survivors.

Who needs one:

- **All women ages 65 and over** should have a regular bone density test
- Women with a family history of osteoporosis, osteopenia, or have had breast cancer themselves may need to start regular bone density tests **at the age of 55**
- **Women ages 50 and older** who have broken a bone in the past should receive a regular bone density test
- Women with a family history (parent or grandparent) of osteoporosis
- Women who have lost 1.5 inches or more of height from their tallest height

Keep in mind:

- A bone density test is quick and painless. Similar to an x-ray, the test scans your hips, spine, and forearms to check bone health and strength.
- If you've had breast cancer, talk to your oncologist about getting a bone density scan. Breast cancer patients and survivors are at increased risk of developing osteoporosis or osteopenia.
- To maintain or improve bone health, your doctor may suggest taking calcium citrate and vitamin D3 to aid in bone rebuilding. Consult your doctor before taking any supplements.

How to Request Common Health Screenings

Talking to your doctor can help you determine and understand which screenings you need and when you need them.

Questions to ask your doctor may sound like:

- *Based on my family and personal history, am I at risk of developing any diseases or health conditions?*
- *Considering my personal health information, what health screenings are recommended for me?*
- *I have a family history of [condition] and [condition]. When and how often should I start screenings for these?*
- *As a breast cancer survivor, I'm concerned about my bone health. When should I begin bone density screenings?*

- *I'm turning 40 this year. What health screenings, such as for breast, cervical, or colorectal cancers, should I receive?*
- *I'm nervous about health screenings. Can you go over the risks and benefits of each screening with me?*

You may also have questions about the cost of health screenings, how the screenings are performed, or how long it will take to get your results. All of these questions can be asked of your doctor or the facility where you will receive the screenings.

Sources:

[American Cancer Society](#)

[The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists](#)

[National Institutes of Health](#)

[Mayo Clinic](#)

[American Cancer Society](#)

[Cleveland Clinic](#)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

[U.S. Preventative Services Task Force](#)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

[National Institutes of Health](#)

[U.S. Preventative Services Task Force](#)

[U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)

Special thanks to Dr. Diana Lam for making this guide possible.

About Dr. Lam

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As a breast imager, Dr. Lam specializes in using evidence-based, state-of-the-art technology for the early detection and optimal treatment of breast cancer. She believes in actively engaging patients in their care through education, clear communication, and supporting their individual values. She is dedicated to providing compassionate care to all her patients. Dr. Lam is also a member of NBCF's Medical Advisory Council.