

Your Guide to Preventive Healthcare

Written by Melissa Larsen

From tests that can detect cancer at its earliest stage to simple everyday tasks (hello, getting enough zzz's and eating your veggies!), proper screenings and prevention might just save your life.



The Big Screens

Nowadays, it simply isn't enough to check in with your doc when a symptom arises. To truly be active about one's health, it is crucial to keep up to date on important screenings that can detect a problem long before you would notice it, if ever. "I think that one of things we are really learning is many of the main diseases that affect people—things like heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer—all have highly preventative components. Obviously, part of it is genetic and part of it that we don't understand, but all of those have significant components that are related to how we live. Early prevention is the best thing people can invest in in terms of their health," says Diljeet K. Singh, M.D., program director for cancer prevention and integrative oncology and program director for gynecologic oncology at Banner Health. Though one should check with their provider regarding which tests are best for them, at what age and how often, here are some guidelines when it comes to making sure you're on top of health screenings for your age as recommend by Dr. Singh and Karla Birkholz, M.D., medical director for the John C. Lincoln wellness program.

20's and 30's:

Dental exam.

At least every six months.

Skin exam.

Once a year or as recommended by your health care provider.

Immunizations.

Make sure your yearly vaccinations are up to date.

Cervical cancer exam.

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"I do advocate for women between ages 21 and 29 getting a pap smear every three years," Dr. Singh says, "and once they get to the age of 30, between 30 and 65, together with HPV test, between three to five years depending on their risk factors is reasonable. I think that is a discussion a woman needs to have with their providers." Dr. Singh also recommends the HPV vaccine (genital human papillomavirus is the most common sexually transmitted infection) as a measure to not only help in the prevention of cervical cancer but other types of cancer. "It is clear that HPV is related to other cancers—cancers of the anus, vagina, vulva and penis." Ideally, Dr. Singh says that boys and girls ages 11 or 12 should be administered the vaccine. "You want to vaccinate people before they are ever exposed; it gives you the maximum benefit. I think that the vaccine is a miracle in a way, as we think about real prevention."

40's and 50's:

Blood pressure screening.

Once a year unless otherwise recommended by your health care provider.

Cholesterol screening.

Once every five years.

Colorectal cancer screening (colonoscopy).

Beginning at age 50, you should have a colonoscopy every 10 years unless you have a higher risk or family history. "The nice thing about colonoscopy [as opposed to digital scans] is if someone finds something, they can biopsy it right then," Dr. Singh says.

Mammogram.

"[I recommend] yearly mammograms starting at 40," Dr. Singh says. "There is a lot of controversy as to when we stop them. I think that if someone is otherwise healthy they should continue to get a mammogram. [If they are] willing to undergo treatment for breast cancer and healthy enough to do it, then it is worth doing the screening test."

Prostate cancer screening.

Get checked beginning in your 40's, as recommended by your health care professional.

Lung cancer screening.

"Recent studies say that people who have a 30-pack-a-year smoking history, that there might be value to them having CAT scans," Dr. Singh says. "Again, that is one of those specific things because there is radiation involved. They want to talk to their provider about that."

60's-plus:

Annual flu vaccine.

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Pneumonia shot.

Once, after age 65, unless there are medical reasons for starting earlier.

Blood pressure screening.

At least once every year or as recommended by your health care provider. “Know your numbers,” says Dr. Birkholz. “Keep track of your blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Be sure to report any changes of these numbers to your doctor, along with any other changes to your physical health that you might experience.”

Bone density test.

Generally starting after menopause and repeated as recommended by your health care provider.

Colon cancer screening.

Can include colonoscopy, digital rectal exam and stool samples.

Eye exam.

Every year or as recommended.

Fasting blood glucose test.

At least every three years or as recommended.

Shingles vaccine.

At age 60 (or older if not vaccinated at 60).

Everyday To-Dos

“Prevention is about diet, physical activity and managing stress,” says Dr. Diljeet K. Singh. “There is so much to do and so much we need to do.” Read on for simple ways to put your health at the forefront of every day.

Stress Less

“Modern life turns on our stress systems and high stress hormone levels [which can lead to cancer],” Dr. Singh says. It is vital for our parasympathetic nervous system (rest and digest system) to balance out our sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight system). “Having that nervous system turned on all the time limits our healing ability and limits the blood supply to our intestines. It does damage to our blood vessels and chronic inflammation.” Simply watching an action-packed movie or driving to work—seemingly stress-less activities—can trigger the

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sympathetic nervous system; therefore, it is important to have regular habits that keep stress at bay, even when you might not even feel tense. Dr. Singh recommends exercise, prayer, meditation, creating artwork and deep breathes to kick in the soothing parasympathetic nervous system.

Snuggle Up

Most people need about six to eight hours of sleep each night to function at their best, Dr. Karla Birkholz says.

The Right Bite

There might be some truth to “an apple a day will keep the doctor away.” Getting five to seven fruit and vegetable servings on a daily basis is crucial to overall health. Dr. Singh says to also focus on lean protein and plant protein, healthy fats (like omega-3s found in olive oil, avocado and walnuts) and whole grains. Dr. Singh also advises to stay away from soda, even wishing that—as with alcohol—a person should only be allowed to consume the sugary, dehydrating drink once they know the potential havoc it could wreak on their health.

Work It

There is virtually no downside to working out. It can cause a decrease in stress levels and being physically active—at least 30 minutes a day five days a week, according to the American Heart Association—can cut your risk of heart disease and various other ailments. “Remember aerobic exercise to keep your heart pumping, lungs and blood flow to the brain, resistance training for your muscles and bones, and stretching for the joints,” Dr. Birkholz says.

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