

Healthy Steps to Women's Health

From your friends at Blue Care Network

Attention, women: Be good to yourself

When was the last time you visited your doctor for a health maintenance exam? Are you taking care of everyone in your home but yourself? Good health includes regular health screenings. These include:

Breast exams

- Perform a monthly breast self-exam. Tell your doctor about any unusual swelling, soreness or dimpling, nipple pain or nipple turning inward, nipple discharge, redness or scaliness or lumps in the underarm.
- Mammograms detect breast abnormalities and breast cancer. Treated early, breast cancer patients have a better chance of survival. Ask your doctor how often you should get this important test.

Pelvic exam

Prevent cervical cancer before it starts. Avoid risk factors and have a regular Pap smear screening and pelvic exam. When caught early, cervical cancer is nearly 100 percent treatable.

Cholesterol and blood pressure tests

Get your cholesterol and blood pressure checked regularly by your doctor. Maintaining healthy cholesterol levels and blood pressure can help prevent other health problems, including cardiac disease, heart attacks and strokes.

Colorectal cancer exam

An internal exam of your colon is important in detecting early colorectal cancer. Tests may include a colonoscopy, fecal occult blood testing or double contrast barium enema. Check with your doctor to see which test is right for you.

Sexual health

If you are sexually active with more than one person, you should be checked for chlamydia, a sexually transmitted disease. It often has no symptoms but can do serious damage to your body. The screening is easy and will give you peace of mind. Ask your doctor about this test.

Heart disease more lethal than breast cancer

Though many women live in fear of developing breast cancer, the fact is the No. 1 cause of death among American women is coronary heart disease. As many as one in three women will die of it.

A woman's risk for heart disease climbs after menopause. Women going through menopause may mistake heart attack symptoms, such as fatigue and insomnia, as menopausal symptoms.

In fact, women may experience heart attacks differently than men. If they feel pain, it may be in the abdomen, in the back or even in the jaw or throat. Nausea, vomiting or a feeling of heartburn may be the only symptom.

If you think something is wrong, don't ignore your instincts. Seek help as soon as possible or call 911. Tell emergency personnel you think you're having a heart attack. Getting treatment in the first three to six hours of a heart attack is critical.

Tips to live by

Five ways to improve your quality of life

- **Don't smoke!**
If you smoke, your risk of developing heart disease and cancer go way up.
- **Curb the cholesterol.**
High cholesterol is a major risk factor for heart disease. According to the American Heart Association, starting at age 55 your cholesterol is likely to be higher than men's simply because you're a woman.
- **Watch your weight.**
It's a matter of health, not vanity. Women have an increased risk of developing high blood pressure if they're 20 pounds or more above their recommended weight. What's more, if you have too much fat, particularly around your waist, you are at a higher risk for a number of additional health problems, such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke.
- **Unwind.**
It's important for your body to relax. You can do so any number of ways. Meditation, deep breathing and even reading are all ways for you to take it easy.
- **Exercise: Just do it!**
Any form of exercise can help you lead a healthier and more productive life. Take a pleasant walk, and you'll shed pounds along with stress.

Coffee to go?

Do you start your days with a frothy latte or a frozen mocha smoothie? If they're a daily habit, those delicious coffee concoctions can be adding inches to your waistline.

Slash calories and fat by trying these tips:

- *Go nonfat.* Order a 16-ounce cappuccino or latte with nonfat milk and save yourself from the fat, plus 50 to 100 calories.
- *Skip the whipped cream.* Whipped cream can add about 120 calories and anywhere from 7 to 12 grams of fat.
- *Don't add sugar.* If you order a sweetened drink, ask for sugar-free syrup. If you order an unsweetened drink, add Splenda® or Equal®.
- *Go light.* Drinks like the Starbucks Frappuccino Light® and the Dunkin' Donuts Latte Lite® can reduce your calorie count by about 100.

It's a fact

Women in a man's world

- A survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reveals that health care providers are more likely to counsel men than women about nutrition, exercise and weight management.
- Funding for research on conditions mainly or exclusively affecting women, such as breast cancer, osteoporosis, menopause, pregnancy and childbirth, is minimal compared to that provided for men's health concerns, according to the Institute of Medicine.
- Women have been seriously under-represented in studies on conditions of concern to large segments of the population, such as heart disease, cancer and AIDS.

The good news is that on the medical research front, the bias against including women in important research studies is changing. Activists and policymakers are demanding to know why so little research has focused on women's health. For example, what anesthetics and drug treatments work best for women? What's the safest way to treat pregnant women?

Resources

Take care of yourself

BCN covers annual exams and screenings and offers guidelines for them based on the latest clinical research. To find out what's recommended for you, go to MiBCN.com/guidelines.