Spotlight on Preventive Care

THREE IMPORTANT CANCER SCREENINGS THAT SUPPORT WOMEN'S HEALTH AND MAY EVEN SAVE LIVES

Between work, family and the activities of daily life, preventive health care may not be top of mind. Scheduling an annual wellness visit and making time for cancer screenings can often fall by the wayside. This can be especially true for women, as evidenced by a 2024 poll that found 90% of women in the United States recognized the value of regular health screenings, but more than 40% have skipped or delayed a test.

This fall, prioritize your own health and talk to your doctor about necessary cancer screenings based on your age and medical history. The three main screenings to consider are:



BREAST CANCER SCREENING

What it involves: A general screening mammogram takes place at a diagnostic imaging lab. The technician will take an X-ray of the breast, which will be reviewed by a radiologist to check for any signs of cancer.

Women (and men) at higher risk, or whose mammogram detects potential cancer, may be referred for other imaging tests, such as breast ultrasound or breast MRI. Both are non-invasive procedures that provide more information to detect or rule out cancer. A breast ultrasound uses sound waves to visualize an abnormality and detect whether a mass is liquid or solid. A breast MRI uses magnetic fields and radio waves to create detailed cross-sectional images of the breast tissue, which is especially helpful if the patient has dense breasts or breast implants.

Who needs it: Women who don't have a family history of breast cancer or certain characteristics such as dense breasts are considered at average risk and should start getting mammograms at age 40 and then repeat the test every two years. Discuss the appropriate schedule for you with your health care provider and whether more frequent mammograms or another imaging test, like an ultrasound or MRI, are advisable.

Why get it: Mammograms have a proven track record of finding cancer when it is most treatable, significantly improving survival rates. According to The National Breast Cancer Foundation, 40% of diagnosed breast cancers are detected by women who feel a lump, so conducting regular breast self-exams is also important. When found early, the five-year relative survival rate for localized breast cancer is close to 99%, compared to just 30% for cancer diagnosed after it has spread.

Prevention tip: All genders should develop general breast awareness, becoming familiar with how their normal breasts look and feel, so they can report any changes to their care provider as soon as possible. (For self-check tips, visit **breastcancer.org.**) Maintaining a healthy weight, limiting alcohol, exercising and knowing your family history are also important in helping prevent breast cancer.

CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING

What it involves: A preventive cervical screening exam (commonly called a "pap test" or "pap smear") can be done in a doctor's office or clinic. The care provider will use an instrument called a speculum to examine the vagina and then collect a few cells and mucus from the cervix to be sent to a laboratory.

Who needs it: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends women begin pap tests at age 21. If the pap test is normal, most women can wait three years before their next test. From 30-65, women should also get tested for HPV as part of their cervical screening. Women over 65 may need the testing less frequently or not at all, depending on their health history.

Why get it: Cervical screenings can flag precancerous changes and HPV infection before cancer develops. Over 90% of women diagnosed at an early stage survive at least five years, compared to just 20% for those diagnosed at a later stage.

Prevention tip: Getting the HPV vaccine can protect you from the most common types of HPV that cause cervical cancer. The CDC recommends the HPV vaccine for both males and females, starting at ages 11 or 12 through age 26. Following safe-sex practices like using condoms can also reduce your risk of getting HPV.

COLORECTAL CANCER SCREENING

What it involves: The most common screening methods for colorectal cancer are colonoscopy and fecal immunochemical tests (FIT). A colonoscopy uses small instrumentation inserted through the rectum to view the entire colon and look for polyps (abnormal small clumps of cells) or other abnormalities. The FIT test requires a stool sample be mailed to a lab, where technicians look for hidden blood in the stool that could indicate a problem.

Who needs it: Most people start colon cancer screenings at age 45 and continue until age 75. A colonoscopy is repeated every 10 years for those in good health, while a stool-based test should be repeated every 1-3 years, depending on the type of test. Individuals under age 45 who are at high risk due to factors like family history, certain genetic syndromes or inflammatory bowel disease should also get a screening.

Why get it: Colorectal screening tests can find precancerous polyps so they can be removed before they turn into cancer. They also can detect colorectal cancer early, when treatment is most effective. Nearly 89% of adults diagnosed with colorectal cancer at an early stage live for five years or more, compared to only 16% of those diagnosed with late-stage cancer.

Prevention tip: Both men and women should focus on a healthy diet that's heavy on fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and light on red meat, processed meats and other processed foods. Refraining from drinking alcohol and smoking, exercising and maintaining a healthy weight can also help reduce your risk.

Sources: American Cancer Society, Hologic Global Women's Health Index, U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, UCSF Health, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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