Resolve to Get Recommended Health Screenings

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If you made New Year’s resolutions, I wouldn’t be surprised if they included eating better and exercising more. These are some of the most common resolutions people make as they greet the new year with an eye toward self-improvement. I applaud everyone who sets such healthy goals for themselves.

But let me suggest another way you can resolve to be healthy: you can learn what preventive health screenings are right for you and talk to your health-care provider about them. It’s not too late to add this to your list of good intentions.

Screenings are tests that look for diseases before you have symptoms, like blood pressure checks and colonoscopies. Many have proven to be cost-effective ways to find and treat potential health problems before they get worse.

Your health-care provider will probably recommend screenings that are appropriate for you—assuming you see your provider regularly. But your health is ultimately your responsibility, so it’s a good idea to learn which screening tests you need and when to get them. You’ll be able to discuss them more intelligently with your doctor or nurse.

It’s also important to keep up with the latest scientific thinking regarding screenings. Recommendations change frequently as new information becomes available.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force is a national independent panel of medical experts that makes recommendations based on scientific evidence about which clinical preventive services are important for which populations.

Here are some of the screening tests the task force recommends:

For Men Only
Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm: If you’re a man between the ages of 65 and 75 and have ever been a smoker, talk to your health-care provider about this test. It’s designed to find bulging in your abdominal aorta, the largest artery in your body. If the artery bursts, it can cause dangerous bleeding and death.

Prostate Cancer: Routine screening for prostate cancer is no longer recommended. Talk to your health-care provider if you have concerns.

For Women Only

Breast Cancer: Recommendations have changed in recent years. The Preventive Services Task Force no longer issues a recommendation. The American Cancer Society suggests annual mammograms for women 45-54. Women 55 and older can switch to every other year. Ask your health-care provider what schedule is right for you based on your age, family history, overall health, and personal concerns.

Lewis and Clark Public Health will pay for mammograms for women who are uninsured or underinsured and who meet age and income guidelines. For more information, call our Cancer Screening Program at 457-8923.

Cervical Cancer: The task force is reconsidering its recommendation. The American Cancer Society suggests that all women aged 21-29 should have a Pap test every three years. Beginning at age 30, the preferred way to screen is with a Pap test combined with an HPV test every five years. This should continue until age 65. Another reasonable option for women 30-65 is to get tested every three years with just the Pap test. If you’re over 65 and recent Pap smears were normal, or if you’ve had a hysterectomy for any reason other than cancer, you don’t need a Pap smear.

The health department will pay for Pap tests for women who qualify. For more information, call 457-8923.

Chlamydia and Gonorrhea: Sexually transmitted diseases like chlamydia and gonorrhea can make it hard to get pregnant and may affect your baby. If you’re a woman 24 or younger and sexually active, you should be screened. If you’re over 24, ask your health-care provider if the test is appropriate based on your personal risk behaviors.

Hepatitis B Virus: Pregnant women should be screened for HBV at their first prenatal visit. The virus, which can affect the liver, can be passed to an infant during childbirth.

Osteoporosis: Women aged 65 and older should be screened routinely to make sure bones are strong. If you’re under 65, talk to your health-care provider about whether you should be tested.

For All Adults

Colorectal Cancer: Men and women should be screened for colorectal cancer starting at age 50. If you have a family history of colorectal cancer, your doctor may recommend screening sooner. After age 75, the decision to get screened for colorectal cancer is up to you and your doctor.
**Diabetes:** Get screened for type 2 diabetes if you’re between the ages of 40 and 70 and are overweight or obese. Diabetes can cause problems with your heart, brain, eyes, feet, kidneys, nerves, and other body parts.

If you’re pregnant, the task force recommends screening for gestational diabetes after your 24th week.

**Depression:** The task force began recommending last year that all adults get screened for depression, including pregnant women and those who’ve just given birth.

**Hepatitis C:** This is one of several viruses that can damage your liver. The most common way people get infected today is by sharing needles used to inject drugs. If you’re a Baby Boomer, born between 1945 and 1965, you should be screened for HCV. This age group is at a higher risk because boomers may have been exposed to the virus through blood transfusions before the introduction of screening in 1992. They may also have a history of other high-risk behaviors from decades ago.

**High Blood Pressure:** Starting at age 18, have your blood pressure checked at least every 3-5 years, more often if it’s high. High blood pressure can cause heart, kidney, and eye problems.

**High Cholesterol:** The task force is silent about cholesterol monitoring. The American Heart Association recommends a cholesterol test every 4-6 years, starting at age 20.

**HIV:** The task force recommends screening for people aged 15-65, including pregnant women. It’s possible for a woman with HIV to pass the virus to her baby during birth. No matter your age, talk to your health-care provider about HIV screening if you have injected drugs or had unprotected sex with multiple partners or if you had a blood transfusion between 1978 and 1985.

**Obesity:** The best way to learn if you’re obese is to determine your body mass index (BMI). You can find simple BMI calculators online. Between 18.5 and 25 indicates a normal weight. If you’re obese (BMI of 30 or higher), talk to your health-care provider about getting help with losing weight. Obesity can lead to diabetes and heart disease.

**Syphilis:** Ask your health-care provider if you should be screened for this sexually transmitted disease.

If you’ve put off these or other health screenings your doctor recommends, remember: They’re most likely less expensive and less inconvenient than the conditions they’re designed to detect or prevent. And they can help you be a better you, with many more years to come!