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## Health Musts for Every Decade

Find out the most important tests, tips and more for women of all ages

By Barbara Brody



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It's never too soon—or too late—to take steps to protect your health. But, of course, the sooner you start, the healthier you'll be. Here are the essentials to keep you on track in each decade of your life.



### In Your 20s:

**1. Schedule annual physicals.** You're a grownup and no one is making you go for checkups regularly—so you need to take charge yourself. This is the time to find a primary care doc you like and trust, establish a relationship, and get checked out (ideally once a year), says Shantanu Nundy, MD, an internist at the University of Chicago Medical Center and author of the forthcoming book *Stay Healthy at Every Age*. Annual physicals are the best way to see where you stand and catch any emerging problems before they get out of hand. Your doctor should check your body mass index (BMI) and blood pressure as well as take blood to check your thyroid health and cholesterol levels.

**2. Ditch unhealthy habits.** OK, so maybe you did some stupid things in high school and college, like smoke, drink too much and subsist on junk food. This is when you clean up your act. "You form a lot of habits in your 20s that will last a lifetime," says Dr. Nundy. If you've already developed some bad ones, this is the perfect time to break them and start on a new path. Learning to eat healthy is especially important; even if you're thin in your 20s, things could change in the next decade or two—but it's much easier to keep weight off than to lose it later.

**3. Get screened for STDs.** Hopefully you've already been tested for STDs, but if not, do it now—ideally before you enter a long-term monogamous relationship and have kids. Remember, HPV (the virus that causes cervical cancer) is also an STD. If you're under age 26 and haven't yet had the HPV vaccine, ask your doctor if it's worth considering now. And definitely start (or keep) getting yearly Pap smears, which will pick up abnormal changes caused by HPV.

**4. Consume enough calcium and D.** Many women don't think about osteoporosis until they're much older, but that's a mistake: 90 percent of our bone mass is achieved by age 20, says Barb Dehn, RN, NP, an advisor to the "Life...supplemented" consumer wellness campaign. Aim for at least 1,200 mg of calcium and 1,000 IU of vitamin D (which helps your bones and many other bodily systems) each day.

### In Your 30s:

**1. Watch the scale.** The pounds can creep on at any age, but many women in their 30s struggle with weight for the first time. Metabolism starts to slow around age 35, and if you've had kids you may find it difficult to shed those post-pregnancy pounds. Since you're also juggling work and family, time is tight. That's why Dehn suggests sneaking exercise into your schedule. "Women in their 30s have infinite to-do lists and they never have time for themselves," says Dehn. "I often recommend a pedometer. Wearing one helps you set goals and see how those extra steps add up just from parking farther away from the grocery store and picking up after the kids." She also suggests getting off the subway or bus 1 or 2 stops farther away and walking at least 1 or 2 flights of stairs each day if you work in an office.



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**2. Make sleep a priority.** Busy moms may find themselves hard-pressed to get to bed early enough, but it really is essential to good health. If you're currently pregnant, you may have sleep problems as well: According to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, the physical, emotional and hormonal changes that occur during pregnancy—especially during the third trimester, when you're physically your largest—can all interfere with sleep. Make sure your room is as comfy as possible and allow yourself ample time to wind down in the evening. Talk to your doctor if you're still having trouble.

**3. Pay attention to period problems.** Regardless of whether or not you've had kids, let your doctor know if you're suddenly having periods that are heavier or more painful. This could signal PCOS (polycystic ovary syndrome, a metabolic disorder), a thyroid problem or fibroids.

**4. Check your blood pressure.** If you're getting annual physicals, your doctor should be checking this each time, but if not, make sure to get it tested at least once. A lot of women start to develop hypertension in their 30s—often tied to weight gain—but they don't even realize it, says Dr. Nundy. Protect your heart now by staying informed.



#### In Your 40s:

**1. Opt in for mammograms.** Yes, the [conflicting guidelines](#) are confusing, but most experts are still encouraging women to start yearly mammograms at age 40, rather than wait until 50. Your doctor can help you evaluate your personal and family medical history to figure out when you should start and how often you should get them (annually or biannually).

**2. Find out about diabetes.** If your doctor hasn't already been screening you for diabetes, starting now is an absolute must. That's because type 2 diabetes becomes increasingly common after age 40. (The American Diabetes Association says you should get checked at least every 3 years starting at age 45.)

**3. Reevaluate your calorie intake.** Metabolism really does decline post-40, says Dehn, which means that you may start gaining weight even if you're not eating more than you used to. In order to maintain your weight (or lose it if necessary), you're going to have to adjust to eating a little bit less. Try eating smaller, more frequent meals, aim for lots of variety and opt for smaller portions of treats (rather than making certain foods off-limits). "Deprivation is out! When we deprive ourselves, we tend to go overboard later," says Dehn.

**4. Keep moving.** "Studies have shown that 20 to 30 minutes of exercise most days will help you maintain your weight," says Dehn. "At this age, if you want to lose, you've got to go for a full hour." Also don't forget about weight-bearing exercise (walking counts) and strength training (with light weights or resistance bands): They can help you preserve muscle mass and bone density as you age.



#### In Your 50s:

**1. Be vigilant about heart health.** We hope you've been paying attention to risk factors like cholesterol and blood pressure, but after age 50 is when a woman's risk for heart disease really shoots up. After menopause, you lose some of the protection that estrogen provided in your younger years. That means it's extra-important to know all your heart-health numbers and to discuss them with your doctor. "Heart disease can seemingly come out of the blue, but usually it doesn't: 95 percent of people who have heart attacks have one or more risk factors," says Dr. Nundy. These include smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity and diabetes. If you have any of these factors—or a family history of heart disease—ask your doctor about getting an EKG and/or stress test in addition to the standard tests.

**2. Get screened for colon cancer.** The good news about colon cancer is it's often preventable—if you catch polyps when they're still in the precancerous stage. The best way to do that is to schedule a colonoscopy, though other screening options are available. (Find more info about your choices at [Cancer.org](#).) Too many people postpone this test, but if your results are normal and you don't have a family history of the disease, you can do it once and then wait another 10 years.

**3. Discuss menopause symptoms with your doctor.** Hormone therapy (HT) isn't as widely prescribed as it used to be, as a result of concerns about breast cancer risk and other possible side effects. But many doctors will still recommend it for short-term use if menopause symptoms like hot flashes and mood swings are severe. This [guide](#) from The North American Menopause Society can help you weigh the pros and cons with your doctor.

**4. Get vaccinated against the flu every year.** The flu vaccine can protect you from getting sick no matter your age, but it's extra-important after you turn 50. As you get older, the risk of serious—even life-threatening—complications from the flu increase, and getting vaccinated is the best way to protect yourself, says Dr. Nundy.



#### In Your 60s:

**1. Get your bone density tested.** Your doctor may encourage you to get this done in your 50s or even your 40s, and that's perfectly fine. There are many reasons why you could be at risk for osteoporosis, including taking certain medications, being a smoker

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and having a family history of the condition. But by age 65, all women—even those without any risk factors—need a bone density test (DEXA scan), according to the National Osteoporosis Foundation. It's a type of X-ray, so it's totally painless. Of course, you also need to protect your bones by continuing to get ample calcium. Ask your doc if you're getting enough from your diet (3 servings of dairy a day is a good guideline) or if you should take a supplement as well.

**2. Increase your vitamin B12 intake.** According to data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys, many people over age 60 are falling short on B12. You need this nutrient—found in seafood, beef and fortified breakfast cereals—to produce healthy red blood cells and protect your nervous system. Research shows it may even help prevent memory loss. You can find out more about food sources of B12 [here](#), but your doctor may recommend a supplement.

**3. Decrease your chances of catching pneumonia.** Pneumonia is serious stuff: It's the leading cause of vaccine-preventable death in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. If you haven't gotten the vaccine by age 65, get it. Most people only need one dose.

**4. Inquire about the shingles vaccine.** Shingles is caused by the chickenpox virus, but it's much worse than anything you may remember from childhood. Forget about itching: A rash caused by shingles can be severely painful, and the nerve pain and damage can be long-lasting. Anyone who's had chickenpox is at risk (the virus lays dormant in your body and reactivates later on in life), but the vaccine can cut your chances dramatically. It's currently recommended for adults over 60.

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