Between work, family, and personal commitments, most women barely have time to grab their car keys in the morning – much less fit another appointment into an already packed schedule. But one meeting has an undeniable payoff: making time for a health checkup now could add years to your life.

Regular checkups can detect cancer early or even prevent it altogether. For example, the number of cervical cancer deaths in the US dropped by 74 percent between 1955 and 1992 – largely because women began getting regular Pap tests. To reap these health benefits, however, it’s important to get checkups on a schedule recommended by your doctor, and to follow the guidelines below for which early detection tests you'll need as you grow older. A woman's risk for cancer does not decrease over her lifetime, as many women erroneously believe.

“How young women think they have a high risk for cancer, and many believe this risk drops as they grow older,” says Debbie Saslow, PhD, cancer control director for the American Cancer Society. “In fact, for most women’s cancers, it’s the opposite.”

**How Often Do You Need to Be Checked for Cancer?**

The American Cancer Society recommends that both men and women get checked for cancer during a regular checkup. A thorough cancer screening should include any of necessary early detection tests listed below, as well as physical examinations for cancers of the skin, thyroid, mouth, and lymph nodes, and examinations of the testicles in men and ovaries in women.

**A Woman’s Checklist**

Review the list below for the cancer-related physical exams and tests you'll need, depending on your age and medical history. For additional information, check online at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) or call 1-800-ACS-2345.

**Physical exams:** A cancer-related checkup should include an examination of your entire body for early signs of skin cancer, as well as specific exams for cancers of the thyroid, mouth, ovaries, and lymph nodes.

**Breast cancer:** Women 40 or older should have a mammogram and clinical breast exam every year, women between ages 20-39 need a clinical breast exam about every three years. Breast self-exam (BSE) is an option for women starting in their 20s.

Women at increased risk (e.g., family history, genetic tendency, past breast cancer) should talk with their doctors about the benefits and limitations of starting mammography screening earlier, having additional tests (e.g., breast ultrasound or MRI), or having more frequent exams.

**Cervical cancer:**

- Cervical cancer screening should begin about three years after a woman begins having vaginal intercourse, but no later than 21 years of age. It should be done every year with regular Pap tests or every two years using liquid-based Pap tests.
- At or after age 30, women who have had three normal test results in a row may get screened every two to three years. A doctor may suggest getting the test more often if a woman has certain risk factors such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection or a
weakened immune system.

- Another reasonable option for women over 30 is to get screened every 3 years (but not more frequently) with either the conventional or liquid-based Pap test, plus the HPV DNA test.
- Women 70 years of age and older who have had three or more normal Pap tests and no abnormal Pap tests in the last 10 years may choose to stop cervical cancer screening.
- Screening after total hysterectomy (with removal of the cervix) is not necessary unless the surgery was done as a treatment for cervical cancer or precancer. Women who have had a hysterectomy without removal of the cervix should continue to follow the guidelines above.

**Uterine/Endometrial cancer:** Beginning at 35, women who have hereditary non-polyposis colon cancer (or are at high risk for it) should ask about an annual endometrial biopsy.

**Ovarian cancer:** Regular pelvic and rectal exams are important for detecting ovarian cancer as early as possible.

**Colon cancer:** All women 50 or older need to follow one of these five testing schedules:
- Yearly fecal occult blood test (FOBT)
- Flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years
- Yearly FOBT and flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years (preferred over either option alone)
- Double contrast barium enema every five years
- Colonoscopy every 10 years

A Checklist for Men

Below are the cancer-related physical exams and tests men need, depending on age and medical history. For additional information, check online at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) or call 1-800-ACS-2345.

**Physical exams:** A cancer-related checkup should include an examination of your entire body for early signs of skin cancer, as well as specific exams for cancers of the thyroid, mouth, lymph nodes, and testicles.

**Prostate cancer:** Both Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA) and Digital Rectal Examination (DRE) should be offered annually, beginning at age 50 years, to men who have at least a 10-year life expectancy. Men at high risk, such as African-American men, should begin testing at age 45 years. Information should be provided to men regarding potential risks and benefits of early detection and treatment of prostate cancer.

Men at even higher risk, due to multiple first-degree relatives affected at an early age, could begin testing at age 40. Depending on the results of this initial test, no further testing might be needed until age 45. Information should be provided to men regarding potential risks and benefits of early detection and treatment of prostate cancer.
Colon cancer: All men 50 or older need to follow **one** of these five testing schedules:

- Yearly fecal occult blood test (FOBT)
- Flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years
- Yearly FOBT and flexible sigmoidoscopy every five years (preferred over either option alone)
- Double contrast barium enema every five years
- Colonoscopy every 10 years

**Doing Your Homework**

“These days, appointments can go by quickly, and we can’t assume our doctors will think of everything,” Saslow advises. “So know your own health history and your family history, and come prepared to ask your health care team about common tests.”

Experts recommend keeping a written list of questions and any suspected symptoms to mention during your visit. If there are questions you’re uncomfortable asking aloud, just hand your list to your doctor.

No one knows your body better than you do. So become a partner with your health care professional and take control of your health. You’ll be glad you did.

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