

Understanding and Practicing Preventive Health Care

Overview

Ways to stay healthy and extend your lifespan through proper preventive care.

- The basics of healthy living
- Screening tests
- Other ways to stay healthy
- The future of prevention

Preventive medicine is based on a simple idea: It's wise to seek treatment when you're ill, but you're better off if you don't get sick in the first place. By following preventive care guidelines -- heeding expert recommendations on diet and exercise, getting regular screenings for common diseases, and so on -- you can enjoy a healthier and longer life. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, an independent panel of experts overseen by the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, issues guidelines on preventive care based on scientific evidence. The following information is based on recommendations of the task force and other preventive medicine experts.

The basics of healthy living

Some aspects of health are beyond your control because of genetics and environmental factors, but your diet and lifestyle have a big effect on your health. Preventive care experts agree that the following can help ward off disease.

- *Eat a healthy diet.* Having a healthy diet is one of the most important things you can do for your health. Conditions such as heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, stroke, and gallbladder disease can be prevented or controlled by eating right. A healthy diet also provides essential vitamins and minerals. Eat a balanced diet overall. While you need foods from all food groups, the proportion of each food group matters. Your diet should include lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. It should be low in saturated fat, trans-fat, cholesterol, salt, and added sugars, with most fats coming from sources such as fish, nuts, and vegetable oils. Go to the interactive site www.ChooseMyPlate.gov to learn more about eating a healthy diet. If you have a chronic health condition, talk with your doctor about an appropriate dietary plan that may benefit your health. Also make sure you are getting calcium and vitamin D daily, aiming for 600 units of vitamin D each day to help with bone health. Ask your health care provider if you need to take a supplement, as many people do not get enough vitamin D from their diet alone.
- *Stay physically active.* Regular exercise is key in achieving good health. Physical activity helps prevent heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, and osteoporosis. It reduces the chances of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression and improves psychological well-being. It also enables you to stay at a healthy weight, reduce stress, sleep better, and feel better overall. So strive to get 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise on most days of the week, through activities such as brisk walking, jogging, swimming, bicycle riding, tennis, or any other physical activity you enjoy. Ideally, you should also incorporate strength training that builds

2 • Understanding and Practicing Preventive Health Care

muscle twice a week and do stretching exercises to improve flexibility. If it's difficult to find a 30-minute block of time in your day, try short bursts of exercise instead. Three 10-minute sessions may give you the same benefits as one 30-minute session.

It is never too late to start an active lifestyle. No matter how old you are or how unfit you feel, research shows that starting a more active lifestyle can make you healthier and improve your quality of life. If you have a medical condition, discuss with your doctor the type and level of exercise appropriate for you.

- *Maintain a healthy weight.* Being overweight increases your risk for heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, and breathing problems. Your doctor can tell you the ideal weight range for your height. To stay at a healthy weight, you need to balance the number of calories you eat with the number you burn off by your activities. The key to this is both physical activity and keeping an eye on the type of food you eat and your portion sizes, especially if you eat out a lot.
- *Get enough sleep.* Lack of sleep increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, and also raises your chances of getting into a car accident. Most people need at least 7-9 hours of sleep to function at their best. Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, and comfortable, and set aside enough time to get the rest you need. Keep your television and computer out of your bedroom to avoid “gearing up” before you fall asleep. Turn off your cell phone or smartphone at bedtime.
- *Don't smoke or use other tobacco products.* Smoking causes illnesses such as cancer, heart and lung disease, stroke, and problems with pregnancy. Chewing tobacco increases the risk of head and neck cancers. Quitting lowers your chances of getting sick. In addition, secondhand smoke is a health hazard to those around you, even if you smoke outside. If you smoke, talk to your doctor about medications and counseling programs that can make it easier to stop. Also tell your family and friends that you are going to quit and ask for their support.
- *Don't drink alcohol excessively.* Alcohol abuse can cause liver disease, heart problems, and several kinds of cancer, as well as lead to accidents, depression, and problems with friends, family, and work. Men who drink alcohol should have no more than two drinks a day. One drink a day is safe for women, unless you are pregnant, in which case you should avoid alcohol. A standard drink is one 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.
- *Don't take illegal drugs.* Using illegal drugs such as cocaine, heroin, and marijuana, or abusing prescription drugs, can lead to mental and physical health problems, which could include hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV. Seek treatment immediately if you have a drug problem.
- *Follow safety procedures.* Basic safety rules can prevent many serious injuries. At home, use smoke detectors, lock up guns and ammunition, keep hallways and stairwells well lit, and remove or repair things someone could trip on. Outside the

3 • Understanding and Practicing Preventive Health Care

home, use seat belts on the road, never drive after drinking alcohol, wear a safety helmet while riding a motorcycle or bicycle, and follow workplace safety rules.

- *Take proper doses of medications.* Always be sure that you know everything about a medication before you take it. Taking too little of a medication can prolong illness, while taking too much unnecessarily exposes you to side effects. Follow the instructions of your pharmacist or physician. Never use a medication that has been prescribed for someone else, even if you have exactly the same symptoms. Let your health care provider know if you are taking any over the counter medications or using food or herbal supplements. If you are taking an antibiotic, be sure to take all of the doses unless instructed otherwise by your health care provider.
- *Limit sun exposure.* Overexposure to ultraviolet radiation can cause sunburn and skin cancers. You can lower your risk for skin cancer by limiting the time you spend in the sun, especially between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.; wearing sunglasses and clothing that protects against the sun, including a wide-brimmed hat; and using sunscreen. Don't stay in the sun longer just because you are wearing sunscreen. And be sure to use a sunscreen that provides protection against both UVA and UVB rays, and reapply sunscreen frequently.
- *Choose a doctor.* You're much better off choosing a doctor before you get sick. This way you can find someone you're comfortable with, develop a relationship, and get care that takes into account your lifelong health history. In addition, your doctor can inform you about testing, schedule screening tests for you regularly, and help you obtain preventive services. Research shows that adults who regularly visit the same doctor get better preventive medicine. Having a primary care health care provider will lessen your costs of health care by keeping you out of expensive urgent care centers or emergency rooms.
- *Get regular checkups.* How often you need to see your doctor depends on your age, health, and sex. Many health care providers recommend that between the ages of 18 and 40, healthy men should get a checkup every three to five years, plus a blood-pressure check every year or two. Women under 40 may need more frequent visits for Pap smears and counseling about pregnancy, birth control, and other women's health concerns. Many doctors also recommend that you have a checkup every two years between the ages of 40 and 50, and every year from age 50 on. Some types of screenings can be done during shorter office visits that don't involve a complete medical exam. The most important thing is to get all the screening tests you need.

Screening tests

Screening tests can find diseases early, when they are easier to treat. The tests you get and how often you should get them depend on your age, health history, and risk factors such as family history and lifestyle. Talk with your doctor about which tests are right for you, when you should have them, and how often. The following are general guidelines:

4 • Understanding and Practicing Preventive Health Care

- *Blood pressure.* High blood pressure can lead to heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease. High blood pressure is more common in African-American people and people older than 45. Starting at age 18, have your blood pressure checked at least every two years.
- *Cholesterol.* Too much cholesterol can clog your blood vessels and cause heart disease. Men should have their cholesterol checked at least every five years, starting at age 35, and women should begin by age 45, if they have no risk factors for heart disease. If you smoke or have diabetes, or if heart disease or cholesterol problems run in your family, start having your cholesterol checked at age 20.
- *Diabetes.* Diabetes, or high blood sugar, is a major cause of blindness, kidney disease, high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, and amputation of the lower legs and feet. Almost all adults who have diabetes have Type 2 diabetes, which usually appears in middle age. You should have a test to screen for diabetes if you are 45 years of age or older and overweight. If you are under the age of 45, or over 45 and at a healthy weight, you may need a test if you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol or belong to a high-risk group, including family members with diabetes. Talk with your doctor to determine if you belong to a high risk group.
- *Depression.* If you've felt sad or hopeless and have felt little interest or pleasure in doing things for two weeks straight, talk to your health care provider about getting screened for depression. Many people don't recognize the signs of depression, so your doctor may screen you for it as part of a routine checkup. Depression may also be a sign of other diseases (such as low thyroid), so don't ignore these symptoms.
- *Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).* If you're sexually active, talk with your doctor about whether you should be screened for sexually transmitted diseases, such as herpes, gonorrhea, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, syphilis, chlamydia, and HIV. Some of these diseases, like gonorrhea and chlamydia, can be asymptomatic but lead to serious health problems if undetected and untreated. Be aware that your risk increases if you or your partner has or had other sexual partners, you don't use condoms consistently and correctly, your partner has an STD, or you use injection drugs.
- *Colorectal cancer.* Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of death from cancer after lung cancer. You should be tested for colorectal cancer starting at age 55 and continuing until age 75. Tell your doctor if you have a history of polyps or a family history of cancer of the colon, ovaries, or uterus, in which case you may need to be screened earlier.
- *Prostate cancer.* Most men talk with their doctors about getting screened for prostate cancer when they reach age 50. If the disease runs in the family and for African-American men, earlier screening may be advisable.
- *Breast cancer.* The American Cancer Society recommends annual mammograms for women age 40 and over. Women should know how their breasts normally feel and report any breast change promptly to their health care provider. All women should

5 • Understanding and Practicing Preventive Health Care

learn how to do monthly self-breast exams, doing them each month after the finish of the menstrual cycle.

- *Cervical cancer.* Women should have a Pap smear done about 3 years of onset of sexual activity or at age 21, whichever comes first, to screen for cervical cancer and every one to three years thereafter. Starting at age 30, women with three normal consecutive tests may get screened every two to three years.
- *Osteoporosis.* Osteoporosis, or thinning bones, makes your bones break easily. This condition is more common in women especially postmenopausally, than in men. A bone density test can help determine whether your bones are prone to breaking. Women should have a bone density test at age 65 and at younger ages if they have a higher-than-usual risk of bone fracture. If you are between the ages of 60 and 64 and weigh 154 lbs. or less, talk to your doctor about whether you should be tested.
- *Skin cancer.* You may want to have an annual full-body exam for skin cancer if you are over 40 or have other risk factors for skin cancer, such as a family history of the disease, multiple sunburns when younger, or excessive sun exposure (such as jobs working outdoors).

Other ways to stay healthy

Here are some other steps that are part of good preventive care:

- *Stay up-to-date with your immunizations.* If you have not yet had a booster for whooping cough (pertussis), you should receive one as soon as possible. This vaccine also includes protection against tetanus and diphtheria, often called the Tetanus vaccine. You should receive one dose of the pertussis vaccine (known as the Tdap), and boosters for tetanus and diphtheria every ten years following. You should have a pneumonia shot once at age 65 (or earlier if you smoke or have diabetes; cancer; or lung, heart, or kidney disease). You should also have a flu shot unless you belong to a group for whom these are not recommended. Talk to your doctor to see whether you need flu and Hepatitis A and B shots. Make sure you are also immune to chicken pox, measles, mumps, German measles, and polio, either through vaccines or having had the disease. If you travel abroad, other vaccines may be needed.
- *Dental care.* Visit your dentist once or twice a year for checkups, and follow good oral hygiene. Brush after meals, Use toothpaste with fluoride, use dental floss, eat sweets in moderation, and avoid smoking or chewing tobacco.
- *Vision and hearing care.* Have at least one screening with an eye doctor between the ages of 20 and 29 and two screenings between the ages of 30 and 39. Between 40 and 65, schedule an exam every two to four years. People at higher risk for eye diseases - - African-Americans over age 40, people with diabetes, and those with a family history of eye problems -- should go more often. At age 65, have your hearing checked. Also starting at age 65, get tested every one to two years for cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration, and other eye conditions. More frequent screening may be needed if you have diabetes or high blood pressure.

- *Consider taking aspirin if you're a man at risk for heart disease or a woman at risk for stroke.* Taking one baby aspirin (65 mg) every day or every other day can help reduce the risk of heart disease in men between the ages of 45 and 79 and stroke in women ages 55-79. Before you start taking aspirin, talk to your doctor about this recommendation. You may need to start sooner if you are older than 40; if you have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes; or if you smoke. Aspirin therapy also has risks, so your doctor should decide if this is good for you. Similarly, if you are at high risk for stroke, your doctor may prescribe other blood thinners.
- *Discuss hormone therapy with your doctor.* During and after menopause, hormone therapy with estrogen or progesterone may reduce women's risk for osteoporosis and colorectal cancer. However, some evidence suggests that hormone therapy may increase the risk for breast cancer, heart disease, blood clots, and stroke. Your doctor can help you evaluate how these risks and benefits apply to you specifically.

The future of prevention

Researchers are studying ways to improve preventive medicine, but you will always have a big impact on your health. Eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise and enough sleep, avoiding smoking and excessive drinking, and following the care guidelines in this article are vital the keys staying healthy.

Reviewed October 2014 by Deborah Borchers, MD. Dr. Borchers is primary care pediatrician whose training fellowship was in developmental disabilities, and a columnist and member of the editorial board for Adoptive Families magazine.