

**Helen Tosch**  
Article Published on [nmh.org](http://nmh.org) for Lifestyle Magazine

## **Your Health Matters, So Get Those Annual Exams**

### **Screen for Your Health**

Annual Exams and Screenings aren't something most people look forward to, and it's easy to justify putting them off a bit longer. "I'm healthy," "I feel fine," "I'm too busy," or "I can't afford it right now" are some excuses people make for not going to the doctor for their annual exams. However, skipping those well visits and health screenings can lead to serious health problems down the road (and even greater expenses). As they say, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Make your health a priority this year, and get those annual exams. The general health screening guidelines for women are:

#### **Breast Cancer**

Most doctors recommend that women get their first mammogram by age 40. However, women at high risk should have their first one earlier. Though mammograms are not fun, they are an important part of the breast cancer screening process, and they save lives.

It's also a good idea to do self breast exams starting at the age of 20. Choose one day every month to give yourself an exam. It's a good way to familiarize yourself with your own breast tissue so you'll be able to detect any changes in the look or feel of your breasts.

#### **Cervical Cancer**

The American Cancer Society recommends that women begin cervical cancer screening about three years after they begin having sexual intercourse, but no later than 21-years-old. This screening is called a Pap test, and it should be done annually until the age of 30. For more information about screening guidelines after the age of 30, visit our cervical cancer awareness page.

#### **Colon and Rectal Cancer**

Colon cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States, and many of those deaths could be prevented through screening and early detection. Colorectal cancer screening should begin by age 50, but if you are at high risk for colon cancer, your doctor may recommend that you have your first colonoscopy earlier. Though the colonoscopy is dreaded by many, physicians at Northwestern Memorial work hard to make the experience as painless as possible. If you are at risk for colon cancer or age 50 or older, make it a point to get your colorectal cancer screening this year.

#### **Blood Pressure**

Having your blood pressure checked is both easy and painless (though you will feel some pressure), and it's an important step toward early detection of high blood pressure. When your blood pressure is elevated, your risk of heart attack, stroke, heart failure and kidney damage increases. Because guidelines for blood pressure monitoring can vary greatly, ask your doctor how often you should have yours checked.

**Cholesterol**

High total cholesterol, LDL (bad) cholesterol and triglycerides and low HDL (good) cholesterol can lead to heart attack and stroke. The American Heart Association urges all Americans to have their physicians determine their total and HDL blood cholesterol levels. They stress that it's especially important for people with a family history of heart disease, high blood pressure or stroke. So, at your next annual exam, ask your doctor if you should have a cholesterol (lipid) test, and then follow up to discuss your results.

**Make an Appointment Today**

Your health matters. So, whether you're 18, 108, or somewhere in between, and you haven't had your annual exam and preventive screenings in the past year, pick up the phone (or get online) and make an appointment today. Following the preventive screening guidelines and choosing a healthy lifestyle will go a long way toward preventing disease and helping you live a longer, healthier life.