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This is an article I wrote for Northwestern Memorial Hospital for Women's Health Week. It was the featured article for a week during the month of May (2008).

Take Charge and Take a Pledge for Your Health

This year, Mother's Day, May 11, will kick off the 9th annual Women's Health Week. Northwestern Memorial Hospital would like to join with the US Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health (OWH) to encourage women to make their health a top priority.

There are some simple steps all women can take to live longer, healthier, and happier lives. If you're already doing these things, that's good; but if you aren't or haven't for a while, why not start this week? Monday, May 12th is National Women's checkup day. If you haven't had a checkup in the past year, join hundreds of women and make a pledge to yourself to do it. Then pick up the phone and make an appointment today. If you need a doctor, find a physician at Northwestern Memorial, or call **(877) 926-4NMH (4664)**.

What you can do to protect your health

Engage in physical activity most days of the week

- Walk, jog, bike, hike, dance, play...do what makes you feel good.
- Make it a goal to get in 60 minutes of moderate exercise every day. May is also National Physical Fitness and Sports Month, so take this time to do something great for your body and your health, and begin an exercise routine you can stick with.

Make healthy food choices

- Try to eat at least 5 servings of vegetables and 3 servings of fruit every day.
- Replace white bread and pasta with whole wheat.
- Choose low-fat or fat-free dairy products.
- Avoid foods that are high in fat – and always try to avoid trans fats and hydrogenated oils.
- Stay hydrated. You can drink fluids other than water, but avoid getting too many calories from liquid.

Visit a healthcare provider to receive regular check-ups and preventive screenings

- **Get regular blood pressure and cholesterol screenings.** Knowing your numbers is an important step toward preventing or reversing the effects of cardiovascular disease. Read more information on The Bluhm Cardiovascular Institute Web site.

- **Perform monthly breast exams.** Self breast exams save lives. Doing these exams yourself can help you become familiar with what your normal breast tissue feels like, so you will be more likely to detect changes and early abnormalities. This kind of early detection could save your life. For more information, read more at the Lynn Sage Cancer Research Foundation.
- **Get annual pap smears and gynecological exams.** Regular pap smears are an absolute necessity. Symptoms of cervical cancer are often absent until cancer has progressed to late stages, and pap smears can alert your doctor to precancerous changes in your cervix that can lead to cervical cancer if left untreated.
- **Consider ovarian cancer early detection and prevention measures.** Take steps to prevent ovarian cancer. At Northwestern Memorial Hospital, we have the only Ovarian Cancer Early Detection & Prevention Program (NOCEDPP) of its kind in the nation. If you are at risk for ovarian cancer, consider becoming part of the program.
- **Floss daily and visit the dentist every six months.** Flossing regularly will not only help you keep your teeth, it can also prevent a build up of bacteria and gum disease that can lead to heart disease and other health problems. For more information or to make an appointment, contact Northwestern's Dental Center Web site or call **(312) 926-3264**.

Avoid risky behaviors, like smoking, drinking heavily, and not wearing a seatbelt

- **If you smoke, learn to quit.** If you need help kicking the habit, take a smoking cessation class.
- **Avoid excess alcohol.** Some alcohol can be beneficial to you, as long as you're not pregnant or trying to become pregnant, but more than one drink per day is probably too much. And remember, never drink when driving.
- **Always wear your seatbelt** – even if you're in the back seat. And ask everyone else in the car to do the same.

This month, take steps to improve your health and protect your body from disease. Think of it as a gift to yourself and to those who love you. It might take a little effort, but you're worth it.