A Lifetime of Good Health

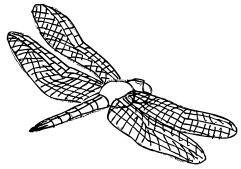
Your Guide to Staying Healthy

womenshealth.gov

800-994-9662 • TDD: 888-220-5446

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
Office on Women's Health

A Lifetime of Good Health



Your Guide to Staying Healthy

About Us 2
Understanding Risk Factors 4
Preventive Screening Tests and Immunizations 6
Medicare-Covered Preventive Services 16
Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention 18
Heart Attack and Stroke Warning Signs 20
Diabetes 22
Coping with Many Chronic Health Conditions 24
Physical Activity for Health 26
Healthy Eating 28
Fighting the Flu 31
Cervical Health 32
Reproductive Health 34
Preconception Health 35
Pregnancy 36
Breastfeeding 39
Menopause 41
Finding Breast Cancer Early 44
Urinary Tract Health 46
Colorectal Health 48
Healthy Eyes and Ears 49
Healthy Bones 51
Quitting Smoking 53
Oral Health 55
Healthy Skin 57
Stress 59
Mental Health 61
Dealing with Violence 64
Talking with Your Doctor or Nurse 65
Checklist of Questions to Ask Your Doctor or Nurse 66

About Us

What is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is the federal agency responsible for protecting the health of all Americans. Its headquarters are based in Washington, DC. HHS is the publisher of A Lifetime of Good Health: Your Guide to Staying Healthy.

What is the Office on Women's Health?

Established in 1991, the Office on Women's Health (OWH) is part of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Health within HHS. OWH wrote and produced this guide. Our mission is to improve the health and well-being of all U.S. women and girls. We lead and coordinate the efforts of all the HHS agencies and offices involved in women's health. We create and sponsor innovative programs that focus on the health of women and girls. We educate health professionals, such as physicians, dentists, researchers, therapists, and nurses. Our publications, websites, and special events reach out to you, the public. We work to educate and motivate people to live healthier lives by giving them trustworthy, accurate health information.

How can I get more information?

We offer two award-winning comprehensive websites, http://www.womenshealth.gov and http://www.girlshealth.gov. These two websites provide reliable, accurate, commercial-free information on the health of women and girls. They cover more than 800 topics on issues ranging from adolescent health to reproductive health to healthy aging. We also offer free assistance by phone through our information referral center. Call 800-994-9662, toll free, and our trained Information Specialists can answer your calls in either English or Spanish. For individuals who are hearing impaired and use TDD, call 888-220-5446.

Whichever way you use our services, you'll get:

- Clear answers to frequently asked questions
- Links to thousands of health publications
- Statistics on women's health

Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is more than a lifestyle choice — it's an important health choice. Breastfeeding lowers the risk of certain health problems in both babies and mothers. It is also a joyful bonding experience.

For detailed information on breastfeeding please visit http://www.womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding.

Why breastfeed?

- Breastfed babies are more able to fight off infection and disease, such as diarrhea, ear infections, and respiratory illnesses such as pneumonia. They are sick less often and have fewer visits to the doctor.
- Breast milk has the perfect amount of fat, sugar, water, and protein to help your baby grow just right.
- Most babies find breast milk easier to digest than formula.
- A mother can satisfy her baby's hunger right away with breastfeeding.
- Breastfeeding encourages a mother to take some quiet relaxed time for herself and her baby, helping them bond. Physical contact is important to newborns and can help them feel more secure, warm, and comforted. Breastfeeding mothers may have increased self-confidence and feelings of closeness and bonding with their infants.
- Breastfeeding helps the uterus to get back to its original size and lessens any bleeding a woman may have after giving birth.
- When you breastfeed, there are no bottles and nipples to sterilize.
- Breast milk is free.

Steps you can take:

- Put your baby to the breast to nurse as soon as possible after birth. Frequent breastfeeding helps your body make even more milk for the baby.
- Give your baby only breast milk for the first 6 months of life. It is even better for your baby to breastfeed for 12 months or longer.
- You can give solid foods when your baby is 6 months old, while you keep breastfeeding.
- **Be patient with yourself! What works for one mom might not work for you. Relax and try to find a routine and positions that work for you and your baby. It will get easier with time.**

Did you know?

The Affordable Care Act (also called "health care reform") requires companies to provide reasonable, unpaid break time and a private, non-bathroom space for breastfeeding mothers to express milk for the first year of a child's life. Learn more at http://www.healthcare.gov.

Breastfeeding is linked to a lower risk of these health problems:	
In infants:	• Ear infections • Stomach viruses • Diarrhea • Respiratory infections • Atopic dermatitis, also known as eczema or very itchy, dry skin • Asthma • Obesity • Type 1 and type 2 diabetes • Childhood leukemia • Sudden infant death syndrome or SIDS • Necrotizing enterocolitis, a disease that affects the gastrointestinal tract in preterm infants
In moms:	• Type 2 diabetes • Breast cancer • Ovarian cancer • Postpartum depression

Menopause

Menopause is a normal change in your life when your periods stop. During menopause, your body slowly makes less of the hormones estrogen and progesterone. As you near menopause, you may have symptoms from the hormone changes in your body. Many women wonder if these changes are normal, and many are confused about how to treat their symptoms. You can feel better by learning all you can about menopause and by talking with your doctor about your health and your symptoms.

Steps you can take:

- **Hot flashes.** Avoid hot environments, eating or drinking hot or spicy foods, alcohol, caffeine, and stress, all of which can bring on hot flashes. Dress in layers, and keep a fan in your home or workplace. Regular exercise might also bring relief. Ask your doctor about taking an antidepressant medicine. These medicines can be helpful for some women.
- **Vaginal dryness.** Use an over-the-counter vaginal lubricant. There are also prescription estrogen replacement creams that your doctor might give you. If you have spotting or bleeding from estrogen creams, see your doctor.
- **Problems sleeping.** Avoid alcohol, caffeine, large meals, and working right before bedtime. Try to keep your bedroom at a comfortable temperature. Avoid napping during the day, and try to go to bed and get up at the same times every day. Exercise can also help. But avoid exercise close to bedtime.
- **Memory problems.** Ask your doctor about mental exercises you can do to improve your memory. Try to get enough sleep and to be physically active.

- **Mood swings.** Try to get enough sleep and to be physically active. Ask your doctor about relaxation exercises you can do. Ask your doctor about taking an antidepressant medicine, which could help.

There are a lot of ways to stay healthy during this time in your life:

- **Be active and get more exercise.** Try to get at least 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate exercise each week and 2 days of muscle-strengthening exercise. Try weight-bearing exercises, like walking, running, or dancing. (See the section on Physical Activity for Health on page 26 for more details.) All older adults should avoid inactivity. Some physical activity is better than none, and older adults who participate in any amount of physical activity gain some health benefits.
- **If you smoke, quit.** Ask your doctor for help. (See page 53 for more ideas on Quitting Smoking.)
- **Eat healthy.** Eat lots of whole-grain products, vegetables, and fruits. Choose foods low in fat and cholesterol.
- **Get enough calcium to keep your bones strong.** Before age 50, you need about 1,000 mg of calcium per day. After age 50, you need 1,200 mg per day.
- **If you drink alcohol, drink moderately.** Limit it to no more than one drink per day.
- **Control your weight.** Ask your doctor what a healthy weight is for you.
- **Talk to your doctor about bone health.** Ask if you're getting enough calcium and vitamin D. Get a bone density test if you're older than 65, or if your doctor says you have a high chance of getting osteoporosis. Ask about taking medicine to help preserve bone and slow down bone loss.
- **Get preventive screenings.** Have your blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood glucose checked.

Have regular clinical breast exams and mammograms (a breast x-ray).

To help control the symptoms of menopause, some women can take hormones, called menopausal hormone therapy (MHT). Once a woman reaches menopause, MHT currently is recommended only as a short-term treatment of moderate to severe symptoms such as hot flashes or night sweats. Women who have problems with vaginal dryness can try lower dose estrogen products, such as vaginal creams, rings, and tablets. Long-term use of MHT is no longer advised, and doctors very rarely prescribe MHT to prevent certain chronic diseases, like osteoporosis. Postmenopausal women **should not** take MHT as they grow older to prevent problems like heart disease. In fact, combination hormone therapy can increase the risk of heart disease in healthy postmenopausal women. A woman should talk about the benefits and risks of using MHT with her doctor to decide if MHT is right for her.

When using menopausal hormone therapy (MHT)

- Use at the lowest dose that helps
- Use for the shortest time needed

Who should NOT use MHT for menopause:

Women who:

- Think they are pregnant
- Have problems with vaginal bleeding
- Have had certain kinds of cancers (such as breast and uterine cancer)
- Have had a stroke or heart attack
- Have had blood clots
- Have liver disease

Finding Breast Cancer Early

Breast cancer is the second most common type of cancer in women (the first is skin cancer). The older a woman is, the greater her risk. Most women who develop breast cancer have no special risk factors for the disease, so it is critical that you talk with your doctor and work out a plan that meets your needs.

Reasons to call your doctor include:

- A lump in or near your breast or under your arm
- Thick or firm tissue in or near your breast or under your arm
- A change in the size or shape of your breast
- Nipple discharge (fluid that is not breast milk)
- Nipple changes, such as a nipple that points or faces inward (inverted) into the breast
- Changes to your breast skin, areola, or nipple, such as itching, redness, scaling, dimples, or puckers
- Wanting to talk to your doctor about breast cancer screening

Keep in mind that most breast changes are not cancer. For instance, nipple discharge can be caused by birth control pills, some medicines, and infections. Or, a breast lump could be a cyst, which is a fluid-filled lump that is not cancer. Early breast cancer usually does not cause pain. Still, any breast changes or pain should be checked out by a doctor. If you notice a change in your breast, call your doctor and schedule a visit. Don't wait until your "next checkup."

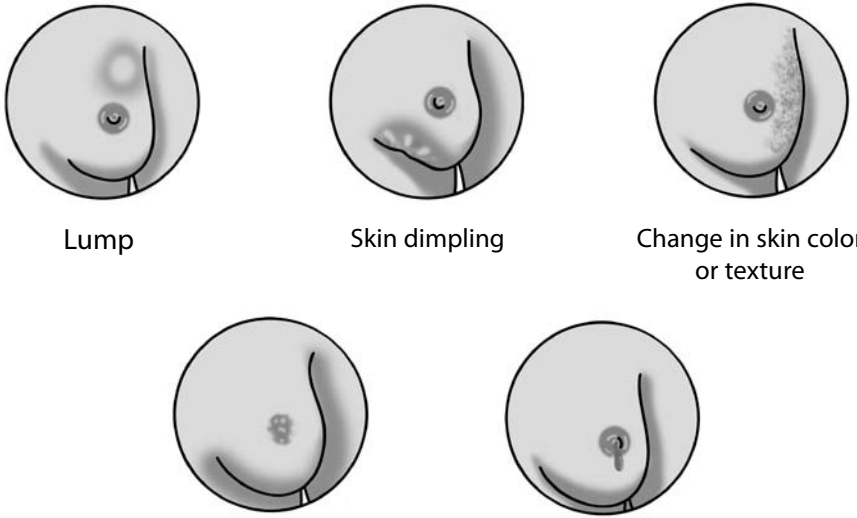
Steps you can take:

- **Get a mammogram.** It is the best way to find out if you have breast cancer. A mammogram is an x-ray picture of the breast. It can find breast cancer that is too small for you or your doctor to feel. Starting at age 40, women should talk with their doctor and make a decision about whether to have screening mammograms and how often to have them. Recommendations vary, but they should be at least every 2 years. Depending on factors such as family history and your general health, your doctor may recommend a mammogram more frequently. Discuss how often you need a mammogram with your doctor. If your mother or sister had breast cancer, insist that you have a mammogram. Have the mammogram done right after your period because it might be less painful and more accurate than during your period.
- **Get a clinical breast exam (CBE) if you have concerns about anything you find in your breast.** This is a breast exam done by your doctor or nurse. He or she will check

your breasts and underarms for any lumps, nipple discharge, or other changes. Ask your doctor if you need a CBE.

- **Get to know your breasts.** Some women check their own breasts for changes. If you find a change, it's important to call your doctor or nurse for a visit. Make sure to watch the change you found until you see your doctor or nurse. Although research data do not support an official recommendation that all women do breast self-exams, knowing your body is key to pointing out any concerns to your doctor.

Signs of Breast Cancer



Urinary Tract Health

Proper functioning of the urinary system is a natural part of your day. It is something that you probably don't think about until you have a problem. The urinary tract makes and stores urine. There are three main parts of the urinary tract – the urethra (which directs the urine from the bladder out of the body, the bladder (which collects and holds urine until you are ready to urinate), and the kidneys (which clear wastes from the body). Bacteria (germs that get into your urinary tract) can cause a urinary tract infection, or UTI. Most of the germs come from the anal area. They can enter through the urethra, go into the bladder, and even go up into the kidneys and cause infection. A UTI can involve any of the parts of your urinary tract — the kidneys, the bladder, and the urethra.

There are steps you can take to try to prevent a UTI. Following these steps can decrease your chances of getting a UTI. These steps may not always be enough, so if you have symptoms of a UTI such as pain, bleeding, or frequent urination, call your doctor.

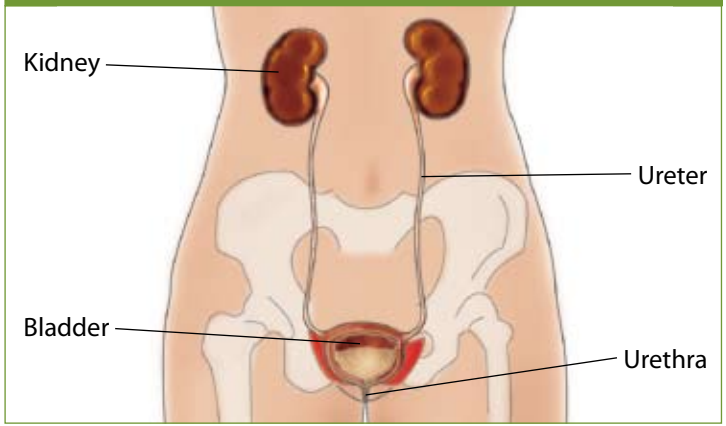
Steps you can take:

- **Urinate when you need to.** Don't hold it. Holding urine allows bacteria to grow and cause problems.
- **Urinate before and after sex.** If you use a diaphragm for contraception make sure to empty your bladder after sex and after removal of the diaphragm, too.
- **Drink water every day.** Drinking six to eight glasses of water each day can help keep your bladder healthy. You can also drink cranberry juice, which may fight infection. However, don't drink cranberry juice if you're taking the blood-thinning medication warfarin. Possible interactions between cranberry juice and warfarin may lead to bleeding.

- **Clean your anus and the outer lips of your vagina each day.** The anus is the place where a bowel movement leaves your body, located between the buttocks. Make sure to wash from front to back and rinse well with water.

- **Wipe from front to back.** Doing so after urinating and after a bowel movement helps prevent bacteria in the anal region from spreading to the vagina and urethra.
- **Don't use douches or feminine hygiene sprays.** These can contain perfumes and chemicals that irritate the area and may increase the chance of infection.
- **If you get a lot of UTIs and use spermicides or creams that kill sperm, talk to your doctor about using other forms of birth control.**
- **Wear underwear with a cotton crotch.** Keep the area dry as much as possible.
- **Take showers instead of tub baths.** Bubble bath detergents can irritate the urinary tract and increase the chance of infection.

The Urinary Tract



Colorectal Health

Colorectal refers to the colon and rectum. Colorectal cancer is often called a "silent" disease because symptoms don't always develop until it is difficult to cure. The good news is that colorectal cancer is preventable and mostly curable when detected early through regular screening tests.

Screening tests help your doctor find polyps, before you have symptoms. Polyps are growths that may turn into cancer. Finding and removing polyps may prevent colorectal cancer. Also, treatment for colorectal cancer is more likely to be effective when the disease is found early.

To find polyps or early colorectal cancer:

- People in their 50s and older should be screened.
- People who are at higher-than-average risk of colorectal cancer should talk with their doctor about whether to have screening tests before age 50, what tests to have, the benefits and risks of each test, and how often to schedule appointments.

Steps you can take:

- **Adopt a diet low in fat and high in vegetables and fruit.** Diets high in vegetables and fruits have been linked with lower risk of colon cancer. Diets high in processed and/or red meats have been linked with a higher risk.
- **Consider taking calcium pills.** Higher intakes of calcium have been linked to reduced risks of colorectal cancer. Talk to your doctor or nurse about whether this is a good idea for you.
- **Try to stay at a healthy weight.** Ask your doctor about a healthy weight range for you.
- **Limit alcohol.** For women, drink no more than one alcoholic drink per day.
- **If you smoke, quit.** Ask your doctor or nurse for help.
- **Get regular physical activity.** See page 26 for more information.
- **When you turn 50, start getting regular colorectal screening exams.** These include yearly rectal exams and stool blood tests, as well as sigmoidoscopy every 5 years and colonoscopy every 10 years. If your family members developed cancer at a young age, talk with your doctor or nurse about testing before age 50.
- **Consider genetic counseling and testing.** People with a strong family history of colorectal polyps or cancer should consider genetic counseling to determine whether genetic testing may be right for them. If needed, this kind of testing can help you decide about getting tested and treated at an early age.

Healthy Eyes and Ears

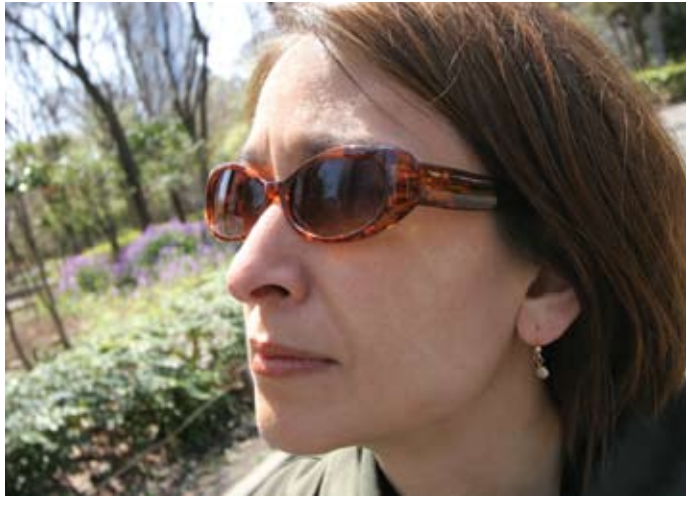
Vision and hearing losses can happen as you age. Other problems with your eyes and ears can happen as you work and play. Prevention, early detection, and proper treatment for injury or disease to your eyes and ears will help you enjoy independence and a better quality of life.

Steps you can take:

- Get your eyes examined according to this schedule:
  - If you are between the ages of 18 and 39, discuss with your doctor when you should have a comprehensive dilated eye exam.
  - Get a baseline exam at age 40, then every 2 to 4 years (or as your doctor advises) until age 49.
  - Have an exam every 2 to 4 years until age 55, then every 1 to 3 years until age 65, or as your doctor advises.
  - At ages 65 and older, get an exam every 1 to 2 years.

People at higher risk for eye diseases need to be examined more often. For example, adults with diabetes should have a dilated eye exam at least once a year. African-Americans over age 40, people with a family history, and everyone over age 60 are at higher risk for glaucoma and should have a dilated eye exam every 1 to 2 years. Eye diseases often have no warning signs in their early stage and can only be detected by an eye care professional.

- **Have regular dilated eye exams.** This is the best thing you can do to make sure your eyes are healthy and you are seeing your best. Your eye care professional will tell you how often you need to have one.
- **Wear sunglasses** to protect your eyes from harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays when outdoors. Choose sunglasses with 99 to 100 percent UVA and UVB protection, to block both forms of ultraviolet rays.



- **Wear protective eyewear,** such as polycarbonate safety glasses, safety goggles, or face shields, when working outdoors or with materials that can harm eyes and when playing sports.
- **Eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables,** particularly dark leafy greens such as spinach, kale, or collard greens is important to keep your eyes healthy.
- **Reduce eyestrain** by adjusting your computer monitor appropriately, taking rest breaks when working on a computer, and sitting upright with your feet flat on the floor when working on a computer.
- **Prevent hearing loss from noise.** Pay attention to sounds around you that are at or above 85 decibels, such as concerts, fireworks, or lawn mowers. If you are around loud sounds for too long, wear earplugs or move away from the sound.
- **Get a hearing exam** every 10 years between the ages of 18 and 49 and every 3 years after that.
- **Prevent ear infections.** You can help prevent upper respiratory infections — and a resulting ear infection — by washing your hands often. Also, get a flu vaccine every year to help prevent flu-related ear infections.
- **Ask your doctor if your medicines may hurt your ears.** Some medicine (like certain antibiotics) can damage hearing.
- **Be careful when listening to music through headphones.** Many devices that people use today have noise levels much higher than 85 decibels. For example, an MP3 player at maximum level is roughly 105 decibels. Scientists recommend no more than 15 minutes of unprotected exposure to sounds that are 100 decibels. In addition, regular exposure to sounds at 110 decibels for more than 1 minute risks permanent hearing loss.

Healthy Bones

Women of all ages need to take steps to keep their bones strong. Unfortunately, millions of women already have or are at risk for osteoporosis (oss-tee-oh-puh-RO-sis). Osteoporosis means that your bones get weak, and you're more likely to break a bone. Because there are no symptoms, you might not know your bones are getting weaker until you break a bone! There are steps you can take to stop your bones from becoming weak and brittle.

Steps you can take:

- **Get enough calcium each day.** You can easily get it through many foods, including dairy products like milk, cheese, and yogurt, fortified cereals, oatmeal, spinach, and white beans.

If you don't eat enough of these foods, you can get extra calcium from calcium pills. Talk with your doctor to see if you need a calcium pill, and which kind is best for you. Remember:

  - Adults under age 51 need 1,000 mg of calcium daily.
  - Adults 51 and over need 1,200 mg of calcium daily.
- **Get enough vitamin D each day.** You can get vitamin D through sunlight and foods like salmon, low-fat or fat-free milk, and some yogurt with added vitamin D. Check food labels to see how much vitamin D you are getting. Talk to your doctor before taking vitamin D pills. Remember:
  - Adults ages 19 to 70 need 600 IU of vitamin D daily.
  - Adults ages 71 and older need 800 IU of vitamin D daily.
- **Get moving.** Being active helps your bones by slowing bone loss, improving muscle strength, and helping your balance. Weight-bearing exercises, like walking, dancing, jogging, stair-climbing, racquet sports, and hiking, can help prevent osteoporosis.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** You can get the nutrients you need by eating foods like lean meats, fish, low-fat or fat-free milk, green leafy vegetables, and oranges.

- **Don't smoke.** Smoking damages your bones.
- **Limit alcohol.** If you drink, do not drink more than one alcoholic drink per day.
- **Make your home safe.** Reduce your chances of falling: use a rubber bathmat in the shower or tub, remove throw rugs, and install grab bars in the bath or shower.
- **Get your bones tested.** If you are age 65 and older, get a bone density test. If you are between ages 60 and 64, weigh less than 154 pounds, and don't take estrogen, get a bone density test. Your doctor may recommend a bone density test if you are younger than 60 and have one or more risk factors for osteoporosis.
- **Talk to your doctor about medicine.** Some medicines can prevent or treat bone loss.
- **Teach your daughter early.** Making good choices for healthy bones should start in childhood and become habits that last. For more information, visit http://bestbonesforever.gov.

Quitting Smoking

Smoking is the number one cause of preventable illness and death in the United States. If you're a long-time smoker, you may think it's too late. But it's never too late to benefit from quitting. If you quit smoking, you are likely to add years to your life. You may also breathe more easily, have more energy, and save more money.

Other benefits include:

- Reduced cancer, heart attack, and lung disease risk
- Better blood circulation
- No smoke odor in your clothes and hair
- A better sense of taste
- A more sensitive sense of smell
- No more second-hand smoke for your family members

Steps you can take:

Research has shown that these five steps will help you to quit for good.

- **Pick a date to stop smoking.** Before that day, get rid of all cigarettes, ashtrays, and lighters everywhere you smoke. Do not allow anyone to smoke in your home. Write down why you want to quit, and keep this list as a reminder.
- **Get support from your family, friends, and coworkers.** Studies have shown you will be more likely to quit if you have help. Let the people important to you know the date you will be quitting, and ask them for their support. Ask them not to smoke around you or leave cigarettes out.
- **Find substitutes for smoking and vary your routine.** When you get the urge to smoke, do something to take your mind off smoking. Talk to a friend, go for a walk, or go to the movies. Reduce stress with exercise, meditation, hot baths, or reading. Try sugar-free gum or candy to help handle your cravings. Drink lots of water and juices. You might want to try changing your daily routine as well. Try drinking tea instead of coffee, eating your breakfast in a different place, or taking a different route to work.
- **Talk to your doctor or nurse about medicines to help you quit.** Some people have withdrawal symptoms when they quit smoking. These symptoms can include depression, trouble sleeping, feeling irritable or restless, and trouble thinking clearly. There are medicines to help relieve these symptoms. Most medicines help you quit smoking by giving you small, steady doses of nicotine, the drug in cigarettes that causes addiction. Talk to your doctor or nurse to see if one of these medicines may be right for you:

- **Nicotine patch:** worn on the skin and supplies a steady amount of nicotine to the body through the skin
- **Nicotine gum or lozenge:** releases nicotine into the bloodstream through the lining in your mouth
- **Nicotine nasal spray:** inhaled through your nose and passes into your bloodstream
- **Nicotine inhaler:** inhaled through the mouth and absorbed in the mouth and throat
- **Bupropion (byou-PRO-pee-on):** an antidepressant medicine that reduces nicotine withdrawal symptoms and the urge to smoke
- **Varenicline (var-e-NI-kleen):** a medicine that reduces nicotine withdrawal symptoms and the pleasurable effects of smoking

- **Be prepared for relapse.** Most people relapse, or start smoking again, within the first 3 months after quitting. Don't get discouraged if you relapse. Remember, many people try to quit several times before quitting for good. Think of what helped and didn't help the last time you tried to quit. Figuring these out before you try to quit again will increase your chances for success. Certain situations can increase your chances of smoking. These include drinking alcohol, being around other smokers, gaining weight, stress, or becoming depressed. Talk to your doctor or nurse for ways to cope with these situations.
- **Get more help if you need it.** Join a quit-smoking program or support group to help you quit. These programs can help you handle withdrawal and stress and teach you skills to resist the urge to smoke. Contact your local hospital, health center, or health department for information about quit-smoking programs and support groups in your area.

Hotlines and websites to help you quit

- Call the National Cancer Institute at 877-44U-QUIT to talk to a counselor.
- Call 800-QUIT-NOW (800-784-8669) to be connected to the hotline for your state. You can talk to a counselor and, in some cases, get free nicotine replacement therapy.
- Smokefree.gov (http://women.smokefree.gov) provides free information and professional help to women who are trying to quit smoking.

Oral Health

Good oral health does not just mean you have pretty teeth. Your whole mouth needs care to be in good health. The word "oral" refers to the mouth, which includes your teeth, gums, jawbone, and supporting tissues. Oral health can affect the health of your whole body.

The health of your mouth can be a sign of your body's health. Mouth problems are not just cavities, toothaches, and crooked or stained teeth. Many diseases, such as diabetes, HIV, cancer, and some eating disorders, can cause oral health problems. For instance, people with diabetes can develop tooth and gum problems if their blood glucose stays high. Regular dental exams help you maintain good oral health and avoid related health problems.

Steps you can take:

- **Get regular checkups.** Have an oral exam once or twice a year. Your dentist may recommend more or fewer visits, depending on your oral health. At most routine visits, the dentist and a dental hygienist will treat you. During regular checkups, dentists look for signs of diseases, infections, problems, injuries, and oral cancer.
- **Brush your teeth.** Brush at least twice each day with fluoride toothpaste. Aim for first thing in the morning and before going to bed.

- **Floss every day.** Once a day, use floss to clean food your toothbrush missed.
- **Drink water that contains added fluoride if you can.** Fluoride protects against dental decay. Most public water systems in the United States have added fluoride. Check with your community's water or health department to find out if there is fluoride in your water. You also may want to use a fluoride mouth rinse, along with brushing and flossing, to help prevent tooth decay.
- **Change your toothbrush.** Use a new toothbrush every 3 months, or earlier if the toothbrush looks worn or the bristles spread out. A new toothbrush removes more plaque.
- **Clean your dentures.** If you wear dentures, be sure to remove them at night and clean them before putting them back in the next morning.
- **Eat healthy meals.** Cut down on tooth decay by brushing after meals. Avoid snacking on sugary or starchy foods between meals.
- **Don't smoke.** It raises your risk of gum disease, oral and throat cancers, and oral fungal infections. It also affects the color of your teeth and the smell of your breath.
- **Limit alcohol use to one drink per day for women.** Heavy alcohol use raises your risk of oral and throat cancers. Using alcohol and tobacco together raises your risk of oral cancers more than using one alone.
- **Limit how much soda you drink.** Even diet soda contains acids that can erode tooth enamel.
- **If you have another health problem, think about how it may affect your oral health.** For instance, if you take medicines that give you a dry mouth, ask your doctor or nurse if there are other drugs you can use. Have an oral exam before starting cancer treatment. And if you have diabetes, practice good oral hygiene to prevent gum disease.

Healthy Skin

The skin, your body's largest organ, protects you against heat, light, injury, and infection. Tanned skin is not a sign of good health. It means that your skin has been hurt by the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays. Too much sun without protection can cause skin damage, eye problems, and more serious health problems such as skin cancer and lip cancer. The good news is that you can take steps to protect your natural beauty and your health.

Steps you can take:

- **Avoid the rays.** Stay inside or in the shade when the sun's rays are the strongest. This is between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. UV rays can also reach you on cloudy days and during any season.
- **Apply lots of sunscreen.** Use sunscreen on all exposed skin that has a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15. Your sunscreen should protect you from both ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) rays. Reapply every 2 hours, even on cloudy days, and after swimming or sweating. Do not forget to apply sunscreen to your lips, ears, feet, hands, bald spots or a part in your hair, and the back of the neck. Also, apply it under bathing suit straps, necklaces, bracelets, and sunglasses. You should put on 1 ounce of sunscreen every 2 hours. Use more if you are swimming or sweating. A small tube containing 3 to 5 ounces of sunscreen might only be enough for one person during a day at the beach.
- **Accessorize.** Wear protective clothing, such as a wide-brimmed hat, long-sleeved shirt, and long pants. If you can't wear long shirts and pants, try to stay in the shade and wear sunscreen. Keep your eyes safe with wraparound sunglasses with 100 percent UV ray protection.

- **Avoid sun tanning and tanning beds.** UV light from tanning beds and the sun cause skin cancer and make your skin look wrinkled. If you want to look like you've been in the sun, think about using a self-tanning lotion. Remember that you still need to use sunscreen, even if you use a self-tanning lotion!
- **Check your skin often.** Look for changes in size, texture, or color of moles or birthmarks or patches on the skin that look

dry, scaly, reddish, and slightly raised. See your doctor right away if you find anything unusual.

- **Get vitamin D safely.** Vitamin D is an important vitamin that your body produces when you are out in the sun. But there are other ways to get vitamin D that don't require you to be in the sun's rays. You can get vitamin D through fortified milk and orange juice, cheese, butter, cereals, and fish. You can also get vitamin D through vitamin supplements. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have questions about vitamin D.

Did you know that too much sun exposure can cause:

Melanoma
Melanoma (mell-ah-NOH-ma) is the most serious form of skin cancer. Be aware of any unusual skin rashes or of any change in the color or size of a mole, and talk to your doctor or nurse about it. Finding a melanoma early can save your life! Check your skin each month for new or changing moles.

Nonmelanoma skin cancers
Nonmelanoma (non-mell-ah-NOH-ma) skin cancers are not as serious as melanoma. However, they can still cause health problems and need to be treated by a doctor. There are two kinds:

Basal cell carcinomas — these are small tumors on the skin that look like small fleshy bumps

Squamous cell carcinomas — these are small tumors on the skin that might appear as red, scaly patches

Actinic keratoses
Actinic keratoses (ack-TIN-ick ker-ah-TOE-sees) are growths on the skin caused by the sun. They are usually found on the face, hands, forearms, and the "V" of the neck. They are usually rough and scaly. See a doctor right away if you notice these growths.

Early aging of the skin
Being in the sun — or laying in a tanning bed — without proper protection causes the skin to become thick, wrinkled, and leathery.

Read "Steps you can take" on page 57 for ideas on how to protect your skin from the sun!

Stress

Women today have busy, demanding lives! You may feel pulled in different directions and experience stress from dealing with work, family, and other matters, leaving little time for yourself. Learning to balance your life with time for yourself will give you big rewards.

Caregiver stress

Caregivers usually take care of the medical needs of their loved ones. You may be taking care of a child with medical needs, or you may be caring for your aging parents. Maybe you've already raised your own child and now you're raising your grandchild. You might be taking care of your spouse, or a sibling. Whomever you care for, your health can be affected by the stress of taking care of someone else. The stress that caregivers are under may lead to missed work or lost free time, strained relationships with people who may not understand the situation, and physical and mental exhaustion.

Stress from caregiving can make it hard to cope with a loved one's medical problems. It is important that people caring for those with medical disorders also take care of themselves.

Steps you can take:

- **Relax.** Try deep breathing, yoga, meditation, or massage therapy.

- **Make time for yourself.** Set aside at least 15 minutes each day to do something for yourself, like taking a walk or calling a friend.
- **Sleep.** Sleeping helps both your body and mind. Try to get 7 to 9 hours of sleep every night.
- **Eat healthy.** Try to fuel up with fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods, such as whole-grain crackers and breads.

- **Get moving.** Believe it or not, getting physical activity not only helps relieve your tense muscles but helps your mood too!
- **Talk to friends.** This can help you work through your stress.
- **Get help from a professional if you need it.** Don't let stress lead to more serious problems.
- **Compromise.** Sometimes, it's not always worth the stress to argue. Give in once in awhile.
- **Write down your thoughts.** Keeping a journal can be a great way to get things off your chest and work through issues.
- **Help others.** Helping someone else can help you. Help your neighbor, or volunteer in your community.
- **Get a hobby.** Give yourself time to explore your interests.
- **Set limits.** Set limits with yourself and others. Don't be afraid to say no to requests for your time and energy.

Mental Health

Good mental health is an important part of a woman's overall health. All women feel worried, anxious, or sad from time to time. But a true mental health disorder makes it hard for a woman to function normally. **It's important to remember that mental health disorders are real medical illnesses that can't be willed or wished away!** They affect both the mind and the body; it's not just "all in your head." In fact, most mental health disorders do not have a precise cause. They come from a combination of life events, brain chemicals, genes, hormones, and illness.

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. It can help you cope with a hard situation. When anxiety becomes an extreme, irrational fear of everyday situations, it can be disabling. Anxiety disorders include:

- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Panic disorder
- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Social phobia (or social anxiety disorder)
- Specific phobias

Like depression, these conditions can be helped with all the "Steps you can take" described on page 63. All of these disorders can improve with treatment.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is a real illness. You can get PTSD after living through or seeing a dangerous event, such as war, a hurricane, a bad accident, or violence and abuse. PTSD makes you feel stressed and afraid even after the danger is over. PTSD can be treated.

Anorexia, Bulimia, and Binge Eating Disorder

A woman with an eating disorder eats too much, too little, or causes herself to throw up food. Eating disorders can include:

- Anorexia nervosa
- Bulimia
- Binge eating disorder

Because eating disorders can be physically dangerous, it is important to talk with your doctor or nurse if you (or someone you know) may have an eating disorder. Eating disorders can be treated.

Depression

When a person has a depressive disorder, it hurts their daily life, and normal functioning and causes pain for both the person with the disorder and those who care about him or her. Depression is a common but serious illness, and most women who have it need treatment to get better.

Symptoms of depression include:

- Sad, anxious, or "empty" feelings that won't go away
- Feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and/or helplessness
- Irritability, restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable, including sex
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, and making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
- Overeating, or appetite loss
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems that do not get better, even with treatment

Depression, even the most severe cases, can be treated. The sooner treatment begins, the more effective it is. **The first step to getting treatment for depression is to visit a doctor.**

Postpartum Depression

Postpartum depression is when a new mother has a major depressive episode within 1 month after delivery. Ten to 15 percent of women have postpartum depression after giving birth. It can make you feel restless, anxious,

very tired, and worthless. Some new moms worry they will hurt themselves or their babies. Researchers think that changes in your hormone levels during and after pregnancy may lead to postpartum depression. If you think you have it, tell your doctor. Medicine and talk therapy can help you get well.

Steps you can take:

If you are depressed, you may feel exhausted, helpless, and hopeless. It may be very hard to do anything to help yourself. But it is important to realize that these feelings are part of the depression and do not reflect real life.

After you see a doctor and begin treatment, negative thinking will fade. In the meantime:

- **Engage in mild activity or exercise.** Go to a movie, a ballgame, or another event or activity that you once enjoyed. Participate in religious, social, or other activities.
- **Set realistic goals for yourself.**
- **Break up large tasks into small ones.** Set priorities and do what you can as you can.
- **Try to spend time with other people and confide in a trusted friend or relative.** Try not to isolate yourself, and let others help you.
- **Expect your mood to improve gradually, not immediately.** Do not expect to suddenly "snap out of" your depression. Often during treatment for depression, sleep and appetite will begin to improve before your depressed mood lifts.
- **Postpone important decisions, such as getting married or divorced or changing jobs, until you feel better.** Discuss decisions with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation.
- **Be confident that positive thinking will replace negative thoughts as your depression responds to treatment.**

Are you thinking about suicide?

If you are thinking about hurting or killing yourself, please ask for help! You can call:

- 911
- 800-273-TALK (8255)
- 800-SUICIDE

You can also check your local phone book or look online for the number of a suicide crisis center.

Dealing with Violence

Women of all ages and backgrounds are at risk for many different types of violence. It doesn't matter what race or culture you come from, how much money you have, or if you have a disability. It is most common among women between ages 15 and 54, but it can happen at any age. If you are being abused or have a loved one who is abused, or think there is abuse, get help as soon as you can.

In fact, millions of women in this country have experienced violence. Violence greatly affects the lives and health of women: the effect can last for years — even a lifetime. But there are places to turn for help, ways to protect yourself, and hope for healing and a better future. It's important to talk to a service provider about how to protect your safety. The hotlines listed on this page can connect you to local resources.

Steps you can take:

- **Don't keep it to yourself.** Get help. Talk with someone: a family member, friend, colleague, or faith counselor.
- **If you've been hurt, get medical attention and call the police.** Abuse is a crime and you have rights.
- **Set aside some money and choose a place to go.** If you decide to leave, you'll be prepared. Put important papers — marriage license, birth certificates, checkbook, and other papers and items — in a place where you can get them quickly.
- **Contact your family court or domestic violence court.** Get information about a civil protection order.
- **If you're in an abusive relationship, be careful when using the Internet.** Your computer use can be tracked. It is impossible to fully erase the websites you have visited. If you think someone is tracking your computer use, please use a safer computer. You may be able to use a friend's computer or a computer at your local library.
- **If someone touches, grabs, or makes sexual comments to you at work, speak up.** Tell your employer or human resources department. If this is not possible, call the police.

To get immediate help and support:

National Domestic Violence Hotline
Web address: http://www.thehotline.org
800-799-SAFE (7233) or TTY 800-787-3224

National Sexual Assault Hotline
Web address: http://www.rainn.org
800-656-HOPE (4673)

National Sexual Assault Online Hotline
Web address: https://ohl.rainn.org/online

Talking with Your Doctor or Nurse

Knowing how to talk to your doctor or nurse will help you get the information you need to make better health care decisions. Here are some tips:

- **Make a list of health concerns and questions to take with you to your visit.** Share the list with your doctor or nurse.
- **Describe symptoms clearly and briefly. Say what the symptoms are, when they began, how they make you feel, what triggers them, what (if anything) makes them stop, and what you've done to help them.** This helps your doctor decide the best course of treatment, along with any tests you may need.
- **Tell your doctor or nurse what prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, herbal products, and other supplements you're taking.** Be honest about your diet, physical activity, smoking, alcohol or drug use, and sexual history. Discuss allergies to drugs, foods, or other things. Tell your doctor or nurse if you are being treated by another doctor or nurse, including a mental health professional.
- **Don't be afraid to ask questions and don't feel embarrassed about discussing sensitive topics.** Your doctor or nurse is used to talking to people about personal concerns.
- **Don't leave something out because you're worried about taking up too much time.**
- **Be sure you understand everything before you leave.** This includes treatment recommendations and any follow-up tests or referrals. If you don't understand something, ask to have it explained again.
- **Bring a family member or friend with you to take notes and offer moral support.** An extra pair of eyes and ears can help you remember your questions as well as the answers.
- **Make sure you can see and hear as well as possible.** Many older people use glasses or need aids for hearing. Remember to take your eyeglasses to the doctor's visit. If you have a hearing aid, make sure that it is working well and wear it. Tell the doctor and staff if you have a hard time seeing or hearing. For example, you may want to say: "My hearing makes it hard to understand everything you're saying. It helps a lot when you speak slowly."
- **Find an interpreter if you know you'll need one.** If the doctor you selected or were referred to doesn't speak your language, consider bringing an interpreter with you.

Checklist of Questions to Ask Your Doctor or Nurse

General Health and Wellness Questions

- ❑ How often do I need a physical exam, breast exam, pelvic exam, and Pap test?
- ❑ Do I need a flu vaccine or other immunizations?
- ❑ Will changing my lifestyle (diet, exercise, smoking, drinking) help me avoid certain diseases?
- ❑ What can I do to be healthier? Is there any reading material or videotapes on these topics? Are there support groups or community services that can help?

Medical Test Questions

- ❑ What will we know after the test is done?
- ❑ How do I find out the results? How long will it take to get the results?
- ❑ What does the test involve? What do I do to get ready for it?
- ❑ Are there any dangers or side effects with the test?

Symptoms and Diagnosis Questions

- ❑ Could my symptoms be caused by or related to something other than my current condition?
- ❑ What may have caused my current condition?

Checklist of Questions to Ask Your Doctor or Nurse

Treatment Questions

- ❑ How is this condition treated or managed? What long-term effects (if any) will it have on my life?
- ❑ How soon should treatment start? How long will it last?
- ❑ Are there other treatments available?
- ❑ How much will the treatment cost? Is it covered by insurance?
- ❑ What are the treatment's risks and side effects?

Medication Questions (you can also ask your pharmacist)

- ❑ What are the side effects?
- ❑ What should I do if I miss a dose?
- ❑ Are there foods, drugs, or activities I should avoid while taking this medicine?
- ❑ Is there a generic brand available at a lower price?

Notes

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Office on Women's Health
200 Independence Ave, SW
Room 712E
Washington, DC 20201

womens*health.gov*

800-994-9662 • TDD: 888-220-5446

Scan this code with your smartphone to go directly to womenshealth.gov