

Time for a free midlife MOT

AS WE GET OLDER, IT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER TO KEEP AN EYE ON HOW EVERYTHING'S RUNNING – AND THAT MEANS BOOKING IN FOR THE REGULAR NHS HEALTH CHECKS YOU SHOULD BE HAVING...

Like a car, your body only works at its best when you look after it properly, and it should be routinely monitored for problems. Too many of us only see our doctor when we think something is wrong, yet prevention is far better than cure. Dr Ellie Cannon shares the seven most important NHS health checks for women in their 40s and above.

BEWARE OF BREAST CANCER

Two million women attend a mammogram each year in this country. Any woman registered with a UK doctor is invited to attend from the age of 47 up until 73, every three years. A mammogram is an X-ray of each breast that's designed to pick up early cancers. The breasts are pressed between metal plates, and it's not a comfortable procedure, but it's a small price to pay for early cancer detection. Don't miss your check-up.

NO MORE WAIST

We talk about weight and dress size but what really matters is your 'waist circumference'. Measuring your waist now forms part of the NHS' over-40s health check every five years, because carrying weight around your middle – being an 'apple' – makes you more susceptible to diabetes and heart disease. Do this yourself with a tape measure. Find the midway point between the top of your hips and the bottom of your ribs. It should measure under 80cm to be 'healthy'.



CHOLESTEROL COUNT

High cholesterol can increase the risk of narrowing of the arteries, strokes and heart attacks – but it has no symptoms. Since it became part of the NHS health check, it's standard to get your cholesterol levels tested from the age of 40, every five years. It involves a simple blood test, but you needn't wait for your GP. Many high-street chemists offer cholesterol tests, too.

BONE UP

Bone density screening is done to detect osteoporosis – brittle bones – which is usually a silent problem. In fact, sufferers may only find out they have it when they experience an unexpected broken bone. Regular screening is currently offered if you've had a premature menopause, if your mum has osteoporosis, if you are chronically underweight or if you take steroids long-term.

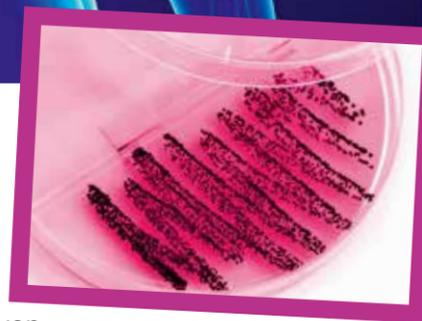


LET DOWN THE PRESSURE

Everyone should have a blood-pressure check every five years – crucial once you turn 40. Having high blood pressure raises your risk of strokes, heart attacks and kidney damage. Get it checked by the nurse at your GP surgery, or there are often machines for the purpose in the waiting room. Many chemists also offer this check. If your parents have high blood pressure, it's essential to check.

DON'T FEAR THE SMEAR

Cervical smears are so important, as they can pick up the early stages of cervical problems before cancer has even developed. You can arrange a smear test through your GP surgery, and you should be reminded with a letter every three years. After 50, that changes to a five-yearly test, but it's still vital. If you can't recall when your last one was, ask at your GP surgery.



BEAT BOWEL CANCER

Bowel-cancer screening with a home-testing kit is offered when you reach 60, then it should be done every two years. However, people aged 55 are now being called for a new one-off test – bowel scope screening. The lower part of your bowel is examined to look for pre-cancerous conditions, or signs of early onset. When bowel cancer is picked up early, it's easy to treat and cure.

GET THE JOB

If your child is starting college or university, they need their meningitis W vaccination asap. The NHS has launched a nationwide vaccination programme for all young people starting further education.

Best's GP Ellie Cannon works in a busy inner-city practice. The mum-of-two specialises in family health, and appears on Sky TV.

Want Dr Ellie to solve your problem? Email danielle.southwood@hearst.co.uk with 'Dr Ellie' in the subject line.

71% OF WOMEN WHO'VE HAD A HEART ATTACK FELT UNUSUALLY TIRED A MONTH EARLIER



Ask me anything...



GOT A PRESSING HEALTH QUESTION? ASK DR ELLIE CANNON

About the morning after...

Q I've heard that women should ask for a coil rather than the morning-after pill as emergency contraception. Why?

A Coils are a really popular method of contraception. They are tiny devices that sit in the womb and prevent any fertilised egg bedding in and forming a pregnancy. When used as emergency contraception, they do exactly the same thing. If a coil is put in within five days of sex, it can prevent a pregnancy. In fact, it has a lower failure rate than the morning-after pill and, once it's in, you can use it as your birth control method going forward.

Has Dad got dementia?

Q My father has started to lose his memory. His GP said it could be dementia, but maybe not Alzheimer's. What's the difference?

A Dementia means that someone has memory loss. Alzheimer's is the commonest type, but 150,000 people in

the UK have vascular dementia, where the brain is damaged through poor blood supply. We'd suspect this in someone who's had strokes, or when the dementia progresses in noticeable steps, rather than gradually. Start talking now with your family about your dad's support and ongoing care.

Help! I'm a gambling addict

Q I'm addicted to gambling machines, but no one knows. Can a GP help?

A Yes, a GP can help refer you to a local addiction service for therapy. This may be one-on-one or in a group, but be prepared for a waiting list. It's also worth speaking to Gamblers Anonymous, where you can go straight away. This addiction affects 0.1 per cent of the UK population, but facing it is the start of recovery.