

Understanding and Practising Preventive Health Care

•The basics of healthy living•Prioritize preventive health screening•The future of preventive health•Making health work for you•Your role in preventive health care

Seeking care when you're ill is important; however, preventive measures can help avoid many health issues entirely. Preventive care includes regular checkups, healthy habits like diet and exercise, and timely screenings to maintain and improve your health.

The following information is based on guidance from experts in preventive medicine.

The basics of healthy living

While age and genetics are beyond your control, you can positively influence many aspects of your health through diet, lifestyle choices, and managing environmental factors, improving your overall wellbeing.

Eat a healthy diet. Prioritizing a healthy diet is one of the most important things you can do for your health. Eating well can help to prevent or manage several chronic health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, fatty liver, obesity, and stroke. A balanced diet provides essential nutrients like vitamins and minerals that your body needs to stay healthy and fight disease.

For most people, a healthy diet includes a variety of foods with a focus on plant-based foods. Your diet should include fibre-rich food like root vegetables, whole grains, or legumes, and protein-rich options such as fish, lean meats, soy products, and low-fat dairy. Healthy fats should come from sources like nuts, seeds, fish, avocados, and other plant-based oils. Limit highly processed foods, salt, added sugars, saturated and trans fats when possible. If you have a chronic health condition, work with a dietitian to find an appropriate dietary plan that will benefit your health.

Some nutrients can be difficult to get from food alone. In many places in the world, people do not get enough vitamin D from food or sunlight at certain times of the year. Ask your health care provider or a dietitian if you need to take a supplement. Women who could become pregnant should take a daily multivitamin containing folic acid to prevent certain birth defects.

Stay physically active. Regular exercise is vital for maintaining good health. Physical activity can help prevent heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, and osteoporosis. It can reduce the chances of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, and improve psychological wellbeing. It also enables you to maintain a healthy weight, reduce stress, improve sleep, and enhance overall wellbeing. So, aim 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 at least twice a week to build muscle and maintain bone health. Incorporating stretching and mobility exercises to improve flexibility will help reduce muscle tension, enhance recovery, and

decrease your risk of injury. Short bursts of activity, such as three 10-minute sessions, can be just as effective 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. Knowing where to start can be overwhelming; however, focusing on consistency and making exercise a regular part of your routine is the most important goal. Starting with an exercise you enjoy will help with motivation to continue. If you don't know where to start, it can be as simple as a 10-minute walk that, over time, progresses into a more well-rounded routine. If you have a medical condition, discuss with your doctor the type and level of exercise that's appropriate for you.

Aim for good quality sleep. Sleep is crucial for overall health, affecting everything from hormone regulation, weight management, heart disease to accident risk. Aim for 7 to 9 hours nightly with consistent sleep-wake times. To improve sleep:

- Create a sleep-friendly environment: cool, dark, and quiet.
- Keep electronics out of the bedroom.
- Use the “do not disturb” mode or a standalone alarm clock to minimize distractions.
- Limit evening screen time, caffeine, large meals, and intense exercise.
- Establish a relaxing bedtime routine.

Drink alcohol in moderation or not at all. Alcohol consumption increases the risk of liver disease, heart problems, certain cancers, accidents, and mental health issues. It can also negatively affect relationships and work performance. The [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) states there are no health benefits to alcohol consumption and that “less is better” for overall health, regardless of specific national guidelines.

Quit smoking. Don't smoke or use other tobacco products. Quitting smoking improves lung function, reduces risks of heart disease and cancer, increases energy, saves money, protects others from secondhand smoke, and improves overall health. These health benefits begin immediately after stopping and continue to accrue over time, regardless of your age or how long you've smoked. Your doctor can help develop a strategy to stop smoking using medication, nicotine replacement therapy, or behavioural support techniques.

Avoid recreational substance use. Recreational drugs and misuse of prescription medicines, including opioids, can lead to serious physical and mental health problems. These risks include addiction, organ damage, and increased susceptibility to infectious diseases such as HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. If you're struggling with substance use, your doctor can recommend confidential help and treatment options. Cannabis remains a subject of debate among experts, particularly regarding occasional adult use. However, two key points are widely accepted: firstly, heavy and prolonged cannabis use can lead to significant physical and mental health risks, including cognitive impairment, cardiovascular issues, and potential dependency; secondly, cannabis use by children and adolescents is especially harmful due to its negative impact on brain development. While research continues, these core findings guide public health approaches to cannabis use and regulation.

Follow safety procedures. Adhering to basic safety guidelines can prevent many serious injuries. At home, install smoke detectors, ensure adequate lighting in hallways and stairs, and eliminate tripping hazards. When out, always wear seat belts while driving, never operate vehicles under the influence of alcohol or cannabis, use appropriate safety helmets for activities like motorcycle riding, skateboarding, or bicycling, and strictly follow workplace safety protocols.

Take the right medications and doses. Before taking any medication, ensure that you fully understand its purpose and proper usage. Taking too little of a medication can prolong symptoms, while taking too much increases the risk of side effects. Follow the instructions of your pharmacist or doctor. Never use a medication that has been prescribed for someone else, even if your symptoms appear to be identical. Follow your doctor's advice on completing antibiotics to prevent resistance.

Limit sun exposure. Excessive ultraviolet radiation can lead to sunburn and skin cancers. Reduce your risk by limiting your time in the sun, especially between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m., wearing protective clothing including wide-brimmed hats and sunglasses, and using broad-spectrum sunscreen that protects against both UVA and UVB rays. Sunglasses also help prevent macular degeneration and cataracts. Remember that sunscreen doesn't grant unlimited sun time.

Stay protected through vaccination. Keep your immunizations current, including annual flu injections and recommended COVID-19 boosters. Tetanus protection requires a booster every 10 years, or sooner in case of a deep or contaminated wound. If you were born after 1970 and are unsure about your MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) status, consult your doctor about getting a booster dose, even if you received childhood immunizations. International travel may require additional vaccines like yellow fever or typhoid. Consult a travel health clinic or your doctor well before departure.

Choose a doctor before you get ill. Having a doctor ensures personalized care based on your complete health history and leads to better preventive medicine outcomes. Research shows patients who regularly see the same doctor receive better preventive care.

Prioritize preventive health screening

Screening tests can detect diseases early when treatment is often more effective. Your doctor can advise on appropriate tests based on your age, sex, health history, and risk factors.

General health screening guidelines include:

Blood pressure. High blood pressure can lead to heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease. Some countries recommend obtaining an updated blood pressure reading at every office visit. Others recommend checking it at least every 1 to 2 years. If you have certain risk factors, you may need more frequent blood pressure measurements.

Cholesterol. Elevated cholesterol levels can lead to arterial plaque buildup, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease. Initial cholesterol screening typically begins between ages 40 and 50. If results are normal, rescreening is generally recommended every five years. However, individuals

with risk factors may require earlier and more frequent screening. Always consult your doctor for a personalized screening schedule based on your individual risk assessment, as factors like family history, lifestyle, and overall health can influence the appropriate frequency of cholesterol checks.

Blood sugar. Diabetes, characterized by chronic high blood sugar, can lead to serious complications including vision loss, kidney failure, cardiovascular disease, and lower limb amputations if left unmanaged. Generally, initial screening for average-risk adults starts between the ages of 40 and 45. Earlier screening is recommended for those with risk factors such as obesity, family history of diabetes, hypertension, or certain ethnicities. If initial results are normal, rescreening is typically recommended every three years, though high-risk individuals may need more frequent testing. Always consult your doctor for a personalized screening schedule based on your individual risk assessment.

Emotional health. Poor mental health can significantly impact physical wellbeing, potentially affecting cardiovascular health, immune function, and recovery from illness. Persistent symptoms such as sadness, hopelessness, or loss of interest in activities for two weeks or more may indicate depression or other mental health conditions. These symptoms can also signal other medical issues, like thyroid disorders. Many doctors now include mental health screenings in routine checkups, recognizing its crucial role in overall health. Conversely, good mental health practices, such as stress management, mindfulness, and maintaining social connections, can enhance overall wellbeing and disease resistance. Regular mental health check-ins are as important as physical health screenings. If you experience concerning symptoms, consult your doctor promptly.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Regular screening is essential for sexually active individuals, as many infections can be asymptomatic while causing serious health complications if untreated. Risk factors include multiple sexual partners, inconsistent condom use, having a partner with an STI, or intravenous drug use. Discuss appropriate screening frequency with your doctor based on your individual risk factors.

Bone health. Osteoporosis, characterized by low bone mass and structural deterioration of bone tissue, significantly increases fracture risk. While it affects both sexes, postmenopausal women are at higher risk due to hormonal changes. For women 65 years of age and older and men 70 years of age and older, bone density testing is routinely recommended. Earlier screening is advised for postmenopausal women and men over 50 with risk factors, including previous fragility fractures, family history of osteoporosis, low body weight, smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, or use of bone-depleting medications. Certain medical conditions, such as rheumatoid arthritis or chronic kidney disease, may also warrant earlier screening. The frequency of follow-up testing depends on initial results and individual risk factors. Consult your doctor about the appropriate timing for bone density assessment based on your personal risk profile.

Oral health. Regular dental checkups (every 6 to 12 months) and good daily habits are essential for preventing dental disease. Practise proper oral hygiene by brushing your teeth twice daily with fluoride toothpaste, flossing daily, limiting sugary foods, and avoiding tobacco products. Early detection and treatment of dental problems can prevent more serious complications.

Eye health. Eye exams screen for vision changes and early signs of conditions like glaucoma, cataracts, and macular degeneration. Young adults should have at least one comprehensive eye

exam between ages 20 and 29, then every 2 to 3 years from ages 30 to 39. Adults 40 to 64 years of age should schedule examinations every two years, while those 65 and older should have annual checkups. People with risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure, family history of eye diseases, or those taking medication affecting vision require more frequent examinations as determined by their eye care professional.

Hearing. Regular hearing screenings are essential for adults as they help detect hearing loss early before it significantly affects daily life. These screenings establish a baseline for hearing health and can reveal potential underlying medical conditions. Early detection allows for timely intervention, which is crucial for maintaining cognitive function, social connections, and overall quality of life. Many sources recommend hearing screening after the age of 50; however, any adult experiencing symptoms of hearing loss (difficulty understanding conversations, frequently asking others to repeat themselves, etc.) should get a hearing screening regardless of age.

Cancer. Early detection through regular screening can significantly improve treatment outcomes for many cancers. Screening recommendations vary by cancer type, age, gender, family history, and personal risk factors. While general guidelines exist, your doctor can develop a personalized screening schedule based on your individual risk assessment.

- **Colorectal:** Colorectal cancer is one of the leading causes of cancer death. For average-risk individuals, screening should begin at age 45 to 50 and continue until age 75. Earlier screening may be needed for those with a history of polyps or family history of colorectal, ovarian, or uterine cancer.
- **Skin:** While there's no universal recommendation for routine screening of the general population, regular self-examination is essential. High-risk individuals—those with fair skin, personal or family history of skin cancer, history of excessive sun exposure, numerous moles, or weakened immune systems—should discuss more frequent examinations with their doctor. When performing self-checks, use the ABCDE rule: watch for Asymmetry, Border irregularity, Colour variations, Diameter larger than 6mm, and Evolving size, shape, or colour. Report any concerning changes promptly to your doctor.
- **Prostate:** Discuss the option of screening with your doctor starting at age 50, or earlier (around 45) if you have risk factors such as African ancestry or a family history of prostate cancer. The decision to screen should be an individual one, based on your personal values, risk factors, and overall health status.
- **Breast:** Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers affecting women worldwide, but early detection significantly improves treatment outcomes. Starting at age 40, women should begin regular mammograms (frequency varies based on region and individual risk factors). Familiarize yourself with the normal appearance and feel of your breasts and promptly report any noticeable changes to your doctor.
- **Cervical:** Regular screening is crucial for prevention. Frequency depends on age and previous results.

The future of preventive health

Integrated digital health tools are transforming preventive care, making health management more proactive and accessible. Wearable devices, smartphone apps, telehealth platforms, and AI-powered systems now enable:

- **Real-time tracking** of vital signs, physical activity, and sleep patterns, such as Fitbit and Apple Watch monitor heart rate, steps, and sleep quality in real-time; or continuous glucose monitors like Dexcom, which tracks blood sugar levels 24/7 for diabetes management.
- **Easier access to doctors** through telehealth platforms that allow patients to consult doctors via video calls; or apps that provide AI-driven symptom checks and facilitate virtual doctor's appointments.
- **Personalized health recommendations** and education with apps that offer tailored diet and fitness plans based on individual health goals; or AI-powered platforms that provide personalized insights based on symptoms and medical history.
- **Medication and appointment management** using apps that send reminders to patients to take medications on time; or platforms that help patients schedule, manage, and track health care appointments.
- **Data-driven insights** for both patients and doctors using platforms that aggregate data from various wearables and apps, offering actionable insights to users and health care providers; or Electronic Health Record (EHR) systems that provide doctors with real-time data analytics for better decision-making.

These advancements facilitate more proactive health management, allowing individuals to take greater control of their wellness journey while providing health care professionals with comprehensive patient data for improved care.

Making health work for you

Not everyone has equal access to health resources, but maintaining good health is still achievable within your means. Budget-friendly options include walking and home exercises, cooking with seasonal produce and legumes, accessing community resources and free health screenings, maintaining good sleep habits, and building social connections through local groups and outdoor activities. Focus on what's available to you and build sustainable habits that fit your circumstances.

Your role in preventive health care

While research in preventive medicine continues to advance, your daily choices remain crucial to your overall health. Maintaining a balanced diet, regular exercise routine, and adequate sleep, along with avoiding smoking and excessive drinking, form the cornerstones of personal health management. By following these guidelines and the preventive care recommendations outlined in this article, you significantly improve your chances of long-term wellness and reduce your risk of chronic diseases. Remember, consistent, informed decisions about your lifestyle are your most effective tools for maintaining good health.

This information is provided to supplement the care provided by your doctor and is not to be used as a substitute for professional medical advice. Always seek the advice of your doctor if you have questions about a medical condition or treatment plan.

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Trish Moldenhauer (She/Her/Hers)

Western Canada Nurse Practitioner Lead, Care Centres

MN-NP (F)