



AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION — THE PROS AND CONS OF DISEASE SCREENING

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SCREENING FOR DISEASES

Lots of diseases start silently. Conditions like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and even cancer may have no symptoms at the start. Screening refers to looking for signs of disease in seemingly healthy people. Finding problems early can help you start treatment and make helpful lifestyle changes as soon as possible. Some screening tests have been shown to improve health and are widely recommended.

“We have great screening tests that have really lowered our rates of death and disease,” says Bob McNellis, a public health expert at NIH. Teams of experts develop guidelines for who should be screened with these tests, and how often.

A new study looked at how screening contributed to help lower cancer deaths in the U.S. over the last five decades. “We found that 8 out of 10 cancer deaths averted over the last 45 years were due to prevention and screening efforts,” says Dr. Katrina Goddard, a cancer control expert at NIH. Screening was the main cause of the drop in deaths from cervical cancer and colorectal cancer.

But screenings don’t always make sense for everyone. Some tests may have potential downsides, or harms. “These could be physical harms. They can also be things like stigma or psychological stress,” McNellis explains. For example, a test may suggest that you have a disease when you actually don’t. This is called a false positive result and can lead to stress and unnecessary

follow-up testing that may come with a risk of side effects. Other times, tests may miss cases of a disease. These are called false negative results.

Sometimes, a screening test finds a real disease that never would have caused issues over the person’s lifetime. But that person may receive treatment because of the test results. This is called overdiagnosis and overtreatment. “Basically, there are no perfect tests,” McNellis notes.



Experts continue to track the impact of screening tests over time and adjust recommendations. For example, screening tests for prostate cancer used to be common for older men. But studies found high levels of overdiagnosis. This led to many men having major surgery they didn’t need. So prostate

cancer screening is not commonly recommended for men 70 and older.

“Screening guidelines do change over time,” Goddard explains. This happens because new research is always being done. For example, guidelines now suggest that many people start screening for colorectal cancer at age 45 instead of 50. Cancer rates have been rising in younger people, “and we have new evidence that they may benefit from colorectal cancer screening,” McNellis says.

Your doctor will take many factors into account when recommending screening tests. These include your age, overall health, and personal preferences. Talk with your doctor before having a screening test.

Questions to ask can include: What are the potential harms of the test? How often do they occur? What’s the chance of finding a disease that wouldn’t have caused a problem? How effective are the treatment options if you find something? Am I healthy enough to have treatment if you discover a disease?

Many screening tests need to be repeated regularly to get the most accurate results, McNellis says. So even if you’ve been given a clean bill of health, let your doctor know if you experience any worrisome symptoms in between tests.

HEALTH SCREENINGS

Talk to your doctor about the benefits and harms of screening tests. Common tests look for:



- High blood pressure.
- Elevated blood lipids, including cholesterol.
- Diabetes and prediabetes, including during pregnancy.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Sexually transmitted infections and blood-borne diseases, including HIV, syphilis, hepatitis B and C, gonorrhea, and chlamydia.
- Cancer, including colorectal, cervical, breast cancer, and lung cancer in some current and former smokers.
- Substance use disorders.
- Reduced bone density (osteoporosis)

US PREVENTIVE SERVICES TASK FORCE

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) works to improve the health of people nationwide by making evidence-based recommendations on effective ways to prevent disease and prolong life. Through this work, the Task Force helps healthcare providers and

their patients work together to make informed decisions about preventive care. The Task Force provides prevention guidance on more than 80 health conditions and diseases across the lifespan.

Task Force recommendations:

- Apply to people without signs or symptoms of a specific disease or condition
- Are only for preventive services offered in a primary care setting or referable from a primary care provider
- Address three types of preventive services: screenings, behavioral counseling, and preventive medications

The Task Force follows a rigorous, multistep process to develop its recommendations, starting with a research plan that guides the review of existing evidence, resulting in a recommendation based on that evidence. Throughout the process, the Task Force solicits—and considers—public and expert input to improve its work. The Task Force routinely updates its existing recommendations to reflect new evidence and adds new topics to its portfolio.

ADDITIONAL MHBP RESOURCES TO ASSIST YOU

Like all health plans who meet the Affordable Care Act (ACA) requirements to cover USPTF A and B recommendations, MHBP provides an extensive range of preventive benefits to help members stay well. We include 100% coverage for a variety of network preventive tests and screenings, routine physical exams, and tobacco cessation. To keep children well, we provide 100% coverage for recommended well child visits, immunizations, and physical exams. We also cover women's wellness at 100% for a full range of network preventive services, preventive tests and screenings, counseling services. We also cover certain medications and supplements to prevent certain health conditions for adults, women and children as recommended by the ACA.

MHBP can help connect you to a provider for covered screening services. If you know the type of provider you would like to see, search for a provider using mhbppostal.com or call MHBP at 833-497-2416 for assistance.

SOURCES:

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