

# 7 KEY MEDICAL TESTS WOMEN NEED

From Pap tests to cholesterol checks—here are the screening exams you need for every stage of life **BY JENNIFER DAWSON**

**W**hen it comes to your health, ignorance is not bliss. Medical tests help many people live fuller, longer lives, thanks to early detection, and test results can provide the proverbial kick in the pants we need to make key preventative lifestyle changes. Below we explain some of the most important medical tests recommended for women, when you need them, and why.

You can get too much of a good thing, however. The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation recommends that patients and health care practitioners consider whether a health test is worth taking, accurate, and will provide results that the patient can act on. Talk with your doctor about which health tests are right for you.

## 1. GENERAL PHYSICAL

The trek to the family doctor for the foot-in-the-stirrups physical can make any woman dread getting back in the saddle. But the reality is that the general physical exam isn't what it used to be. According to Dr. Merrilee Fullerton, a family physician practicing in Kanata, ON, the traditional physical has morphed into a screening and prevention visit. You'll still get to don that universally unflattering gown, but you'll also be asked an exhaustive list of questions, geared to your specific age and health status, to review your symptoms, identify appropriate screening tests and discuss prevention and lifestyle issues. Think of it as a customized exam that considers your individual risk factors, including age, gender and family history. Based on findings, your physician may order other tests or refer you to specialists.

**When to start?** Screening starts at birth, and often before. Maintain this habit for life.



**How often?** Usually annually. Your doctor will recommend a schedule that's right for you.

**Speak Up:** This is a perfect time to discuss things on your mind, such as losing weight, medication side effects, quitting smoking, sexual concerns or family history.

## 2. PAP TEST

The test we love to hate is a simple, reliable tool for spotting pre-cancerous and cancerous cervical cells. It's usually combined with other health screening procedures (i.e. for sexually transmitted diseases) during a full pelvic exam. If women had regular Pap tests, 90 percent of cervical cancers would be prevented.

**When to start?** When you become sexually active, or by age 18, and at least until you're 65.

**How often?** Recommendations vary by province and territory. While many physicians recommend having an annual Pap test, others advise once a year until you've had three normal tests in a row, and then every three years after that, as long as results remain normal. If you're sexually active with multiple partners, go for the annual option.

**Health Memo:** The human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine only protects against four of the most common cancer-causing strains of the virus, so even those who get the shot should get Pap tests regularly.

## 3. CHOLESTEROL CHECK

Seven times more women die of heart disease and stroke than breast cancer each year. A cholesterol blood test is one way to determine your risk for these cardiovascular conditions, which have been labelled as "silent killers."

**When to start?** Have your first cholesterol test in your 20s to establish a reference point. A family history of cardiovascular disease may prompt earlier testing, however. The Public Health Agency of Canada recommends further screening for women who are post-menopausal or over 50. Your family doctor may advise earlier tests, based on your individual or hereditary risk factors.

**How often?** Annually, but if you have high cholesterol, you'll be monitored more often.

**Did You Know?** Cholesterol levels go up after menopause as a result of the decrease in protective estrogen.

## 4. MAMMOGRAM

One in nine women will develop breast cancer, and mammography is currently the only imaging technique licensed by Health Canada for breast cancer screening. Regular screening with mammograms is believed to reduce breast cancer deaths by as much as one-third for women aged 50 to 69. And what about self exams? "Twenty years ago, breast self-examination was expected to prevent problems," says Dr. Fullerton, "but studies aren't bearing that out." Fullerton recommends that women do monthly breast exams if it helps them feel in control of their health, but to be aware that this sometimes leads to unnecessary intervention.

**When to start?** A baseline mammogram should be done at age 50. In some cases, though, women should have their first mammogram at 40—ask your family doctor.

**How often?** Usually every two years until age 69.

**The Screen Scene:** To find an accredited breast cancer screening facility, talk to your doctor or search the Canadian Association of Radiologists' online database at [www.car.ca](http://www.car.ca)

## 5. GLAUCOMA TEST

Glaucoma affects 250,000 Canadians and is one of the most common causes of blindness. Testing by a qualified optometrist or ophthalmologist is important, because it's a disease with very few symptoms that happens slowly. It's marked by the gradual breakdown of cells that make up the optic nerve. What's the test like? Simple—a puff of air

is blown into your eye by a device, and an instrument measures the pressure (or resistance) in your eyeball.

**When to start?** According to Dr. Andrew Leung, an optometrist practicing in Toronto, ON glaucoma is most common in people over 50, but he recommends a glaucoma test for all adults.

**How often?** Every two years.

**Fact:** About half of people with glaucoma don't know it until it's advanced and vision loss has occurred.

## 6. FECAL OCCULT BLOOD TEST (FOBT)

No, this test doesn't involve a Ouija board. It's performed on three separate stool samples you collect at home and then take to a medical lab, and tests for non-visible blood in your stool. If blood is detected, you'll be referred for further screening, usually a colonoscopy. The Canadian Cancer Society recommends against purchasing over-the-counter FOBT testing kits, as they are less reliable than lab tests. You can ask your doctor for a free home test kit.

**When to start?** Age 50. Screening with colonoscopy may happen sooner if symptoms are present or there's a family history.

**How often?** Every two years.

**No Ifs, Ands or Buts:** Visit the website [www.ColonCancerCheck.ca](http://www.ColonCancerCheck.ca) for more information about the FOBT test now.

## 7. BONE MINERAL DENSITY TEST (BMD)

One in four women over age 50 has osteoporosis, and it sneaks up on many of us. This test, performed at a limited number of facilities across Canada, gives a safe, painless and accurate measure of the porosity of your bones and presence (or risk) of osteoporosis. Because of the limited availability of BMD testing facilities, a heel ultrasound test may be recommended as a first step in screening for osteoporosis. If this more widely accessible test indicates low bone density, your doctor can further recommend a BMD test.

**When to start?** At age 65. Earlier screening may be necessary, depending on individual medical conditions. Discuss your needs with your health care provider.

**How often?** Annually. **THI**

**Health Hint:** Make sure you're re-tested on the same BMD machine when possible for consistent, reliable results.