

# 10 ways women can stay healthy

May 3 2017, by Lauren Woods

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

May is Women's Health Month. Experts from the UConn Health Women's Center are urging all women to take action each and every day to maintain their overall health and prevent breast and other cancers by keeping these health tips top of mind:

- **Exercise 30 Minutes a Day:** "The number one thing women can do to maintain their health and keep disease at bay is exercise daily," says Molly Brewer, chair of the Department of Obstetrics

and Gynecology at UConn Health, who recommends all women exercise 30 minutes per day. It will not only improve your cardiovascular health but also help you maintain a healthy weight, body mass index, and lower your risk of developing endometrial (uterine) cancer, breast cancer, and [colon cancer](#), which are all linked with obesity. "With rising rates of obesity in America there has been a parallel increase in cancer diagnoses, especially for uterine cancer," Brewer says. In addition, exercise can lower excess hormones in the body, which in turn lowers cancer risks, along with stress levels.

- **Make Time for Your Health:** Women generally lead busy lives. In addition to making time to exercise daily, make sure you are maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including seeing your OB/GYN annually. "A simple chat with your doctor is key for maintaining your overall health, whether for cancer prevention, a healthy pregnancy, or managing menopause – make time for you," says Danielle E. Luciano, a gynecologist and minimally invasive surgeon at UConn Health's Women's Center.
- **Listen to Your Body:** Over the course of a woman's lifetime, a host of conditions can arise. The most common issues can be endometriosis, ovarian cysts, uterine fibroids, breast cancer, or gynecological cancers such as endometrial, cervical, or ovarian. "It is very important to see your OB/GYN annually for preventive screenings, potential early cancer catches, and also to report any warning signs or worrisome health changes," says Luciano. Warning signs are changes in your menstrual cycle, abnormal bleeding and bloating, fatigue, and any health change leading you to just not feel like yourself. Alerting your doctor right away can help the physician identify the culprit and offer a minimally invasive solution to treat your condition and potentially save your life.
- **Eat Healthy Every Day:** Similarly to preventing heart disease, eating a healthy daily dose of nutritious, colorful fruits and

vegetables is key to preventing and lowering your risk of developing breast and other women's cancers fueled by obesity. "Women should minimize the processed foods they eat from a box," says Alex Merkulov, a radiologist at the Beekley Imaging Center of the Women's Center at UConn Health. "Natural, whole, and fresh foods are always the best choices. Also, avoid fried foods, which often contain trans-fats, and reach for foods and snacks low in saturated fats, sugar, and salt."

- **Quit Smoking:** More than 13 percent of women are still smoking cigarettes in the U.S., even though the evidence is clear that it leads to premature death, heart disease such as hardening of the body's arteries, heart attack and stroke, and lung and other cancers. In fact, lung cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death among women. "If women are currently smoking, they need to quit the habit now to lower their future health risks," says Brewer. "Cancers caused by smoking are preventable if you put the cigarettes down. Seek a smoking-cessation program to help you quit for good."
- **Check Your Breasts:** One in eight women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime. But the good news according to Merkulov is that if breast cancer is caught early, it can be treated effectively. "It is critical that, starting at age 40, women come in for a baseline mammogram so their breast health and any abnormal changes can be monitored annually as they age." While more than 90 percent of abnormal mammogram findings in the end turn out to be benign, Merkulov stresses that an early mammogram is the only tool available to help reduce a woman's chance of dying from [breast cancer](#). In between yearly mammograms, women should perform monthly breast self-exams.
- **Get a Pap Smear:** Once a woman becomes sexually active, experts say she should be going to the OB/GYN for regular pelvic exams and [pap smear](#) screenings. The pap smear tests for

signs of vaginal and cervical cancers, along with sexually transmitted diseases such as human papillomavirus (HPV) or genital warts. "Some HPV strains place a woman at higher risk of [cervical cancer](#)," says Shannon DeGroff, an OB/GYN at UConn Health Canton. "HPV infection is very common in both women and men who are sexually active. However, the virus doesn't always cause symptoms, which is why screening is so important, especially for high-risk cancer-causing strains."

- **Prevent HPV:** High HPV prevalence is leading to increased rates of cervical cancer, and also a rise in head and neck cancer from oral sex transmission. In 2006, a vaccine to prevent HPV became available. However, data shows that only 25 percent of eligible young women ages 11-26 are actually getting the vaccine. "The HPV vaccine is only effective in preventing the spread of the disease if male and female youth are vaccinated," says Brewer. Brewer says studies in Australia, where the HPV vaccine was mandated for school-aged children more than a decade ago, show it is working to prevent the disease's spread and reduce the country's cervical cancer rates.
- **Prenatal Care to Prepare for Pregnancy:** A healthy pregnancy and baby starts with a healthy mom-to-be. "The most important focus is on a woman's overall [health](#) and wellness before pregnancy in order to have a healthy pregnancy," says Christopher Morosky, an OB/GYN at UConn Health. If you're hoping to become pregnant for the first time or again, make sure to visit your OB/GYN for a pre-conception visit. Early prenatal care – including taking folic acid, getting to a healthier pre-pregnancy weight, practicing a good daily diet, and following an exercise routine are all critical for both fertility and a healthy pregnancy. It is also important to avoid drinking alcohol and ingesting tobacco, and to take a close look to see if your medication list needs to be adjusted for pregnancy. "If you are struggling to become pregnant don't worry," says Morosky. "There are

OB/GYN and fertility experts and technology available to help you and your significant other find out why and help you succeed."

- Get a Colonoscopy: Colon cancer is the third largest cause of cancer death among women. "At age 50, [women](#) need to make sure they start getting their regular colonoscopy screening," says Brewer. Catching any abnormal colon polyp growths early with colonoscopy can prevent [cancer](#) from further developing or spreading. Also, practicing a healthy lifestyle and diet can help prevent the disease.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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