

• Sometimes you need to take a closer look...

Get Checked Out!

Your diary is packed and you feel great, so no harm in putting off that check-up, right? Wrong. These tests all take 15 minutes (or less), but they could change your life

By Gotlhokwang Angema

Although Belinda had a family history of diabetes, she'd never been screened for it. Then, in high school, she started feeling thirsty and tired. She ignored the signs – even when her family noticed how much time she was spending in bed. When she did find her way to a doctor, the diagnosis was type-1 diabetes. “I wish I’d been diagnosed earlier – the longer I was left untreated, the harder it hit my body,” says Belinda. “There were things I couldn’t enjoy because I was feeling too ill.” Being diagnosed has allowed Belinda to manage her condition so she can once again enjoy an active lifestyle. And she diligently visits her GP every six months. “The earlier we identify potential health problems, the better the outcome will be,” says Cape Town-based GP Dr Simone Shelly. These screenings are a good place to start. >

Pap smear

One in 36 South African women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer and a Pap smear is the best way to detect abnormal cells in the cervix.

> How often: If you're in a committed relationship, get one every three years, starting at age 21. From 30, you can go every five years. If you're a smoker, began having intercourse at a young age, are HIV-positive or have an STI, have one annually. As well as your gynae, day hospitals and many GPs perform Pap smears.

> What to expect: A speculum is inserted into the vagina and the tip is opened up so your doc can look at the cervix with a torch, explains Shelly. "The doctor then uses a small spatula or endobrush (like a tiny toothbrush) to rub cells off the cervix." These are sent to the lab for analysis. "But note: a clear Pap smear doesn't mean that you are clear of HIV or STIs," cautions Shelly.

Skin and mole check

According to the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA), skin cancer is one of the most common cancers in SA, with about 20 000 cases and 700 deaths reported annually. A mole screening detects melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer – the doc will be looking for early signs of change in your moles.

> How often: Dermatologist Dr Kesiree Naidoo from Vincent Pallotti Hospital suggests going at least once a year from your twenties, depending on skin type and family history. If you're high risk (fair-skinned with many moles), you may need to start mole screening much earlier. If you have a mole that bothers you at any age, have it assessed by a dermatologist.

> What to expect: You'll need to strip down to your underwear and have your entire body examined, explains Naidoo. The dermatologist might use a dermatoscope or magnifying lamp. Patients with multiple moles may benefit from mole mapping: this involves recording individual moles for comparison. Your doc will cut out suspicious-looking moles and send them to a lab to be examined.

Mammogram

"A mammogram is the most affordable and reliable imaging tool we currently have to detect breast cancer early, up to two years before a lump is felt," explains breast radiologist Dr Sumi Padayachee. Mammograms pick up abnormal calcium deposits or masses in breast tissue; if these are found, you may need to go for an ultrasound and/or biopsies.

> How often: From the age of 40, you should be having a mammogram annually. If there are any concerns or a family history, you can start from 35. "If your mom had or has breast cancer, it's advisable to



Blood pressure

One minute; once a year

Cost: Around R300 for a GP consultation (cheaper or free at clinics and pharmacies)

Medical aid cover: Yes, depending on your plan and if part of GP consultation

Pain factor: 1/10 (brief discomfort as your arm is squeezed)

Shame factor: 0/10



Mammogram

Ten to 15 minutes; every one to two years (age dependent)

Cost: Around R1 000

Medical aid cover: Yes

Pain factor: 3/10 (smaller breasts may hurt more)

Shame factor: 6/10 (let's face it, your breasts are being squashed)



Pap smear

Three minutes; every one to five years, depending on risk

Cost: Around R250 for the consultation – analysis may be extra

Medical aid cover: Usually, depending on your plan

Pain factor: 5/10 (doctors say 3, but we know better)

Shame factor: 10/10



Diabetes screening

Four minutes; once a year

Cost: Around R25 for a finger-prick test – consultation rate may apply

Medical aid cover: Depending on the plan and if part of GP consultation

Pain factor: 2/10 (a prick to the side of the finger helps ease the pain)

Shame factor: 0/10



Skin and mole check

Ten to 20 minutes; once a year

Cost: Around R500

Medical aid cover: Usually, depending on your plan

Pain factor: 0/10

Shame factor: 3/10 (depending how worn your undies are)



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have a mammogram 10 years before the age she was diagnosed," says Padayachee.

> What to expect: You'll need to go to a radiologist, where your breasts will be compressed between two plates for a few seconds while images are taken. "For comfort, it's best to have a mammogram seven to 10 days after the onset of your last period," says Padayachee. "What most women don't realise is that a number of medical aids pay for a yearly mammogram out of what's called a 'risk benefit'. In effect, the mammogram is free and not paid for out of your medical savings account," she adds.

Blood pressure

About one in four South Africans between the ages of 15 and 64 suffers from high blood pressure, which, if uncontrolled, can lead to heart attack, stroke or damaged eyesight (glaucoma and blindness). In fact, it's one of the leading causes of heart attacks and strokes, according to the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA. The sweet spot is around 120/80 – much higher or lower than that and you may need further tests or medication.

> How often: You should start with annual screenings from the age of 40, says Shelly – although women on the Pill should also be screened regularly since the Pill can affect BP. First thing in the morning is the best time (you know, before the kids/traffic/your boss start getting you worked up).

CHECK LIST

These tests may not be high on your hit list, but recent research recommends them for women ages 18 to 50

1/ THYROID GLAND SCREENING A blood test measures your levels of thyroid-stimulating hormone.
Do it: Every five years or at your doctor's discretion if you suddenly suffer from fatigue, weight gain (or loss) and depression.

2/ CHOLESTEROL SCREENING A simple blood test reveals the amount of cholesterol (a fat produced by the liver) in your blood.
Do it: Every five years or at your doctor's discretion if you have a family history of high cholesterol or other risk factors. High levels of cholesterol can eventually form plaque in the heart, which can lead to a heart attack or stroke.

3/ STI TESTS A cervical swab similar to a Pap smear to check for gonorrhoea and chlamydia; blood tests screen for HIV, syphilis and hepatitis.
Do it: Annually, or every time you have a new sexual partner. Eighty to 90 percent of the world's STIs occur in developing countries such as SA.

4/ COLONOSCOPY A tiny camera is inserted through the rectum so the doc can examine your colon. Sounds unpleasant, but the prep is more uncomfortable than the procedure – you'll need to fast and have an enema.
Do it: Every year from age 50. Many people mistakenly think of colon cancer as a man's disease, but it's equally common in women. If caught early, it usually responds well to treatment.

> What to expect: A Baumanometer cuff (inflatable strap) is wrapped around your upper arm and a stethoscope placed at your inner elbow. The cuff is inflated and a reading is taken as it deflates. Most pharmacies have a nurse who can quickly check your BP and some gyms have machines where you can do your own screening.

Diabetes screening

According to Diabetes South Africa, if left untreated, the high levels of blood glucose associated with diabetes can slowly damage both fine nerves and blood vessels, resulting in complications like heart disease, blindness, amputation and kidney disease. A blood glucose level between 3.5 and 5.5mmol/L before a meal is considered normal.

> How often: Start going for annual screenings from the age of 35 (20 if you have a family history). Don't skip the test if you're overweight (especially if you carry most of your weight around your middle), have high cholesterol or blood pressure, or are of Indian descent – these are all high-risk factors.

> What to expect: A simple finger-prick test measures blood sugar levels following an eight-hour fast – typically blood glucose levels are measured in the morning before breakfast. It's used to help identify diabetes, as well as to monitor blood sugar control in patients already diagnosed with the condition. ■