

Women's Health

"Communities and countries and ultimately the world are only as strong as the health of their women." – Michelle Obama

The World Health Organisation (WHO) refers to health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". But with health, also comes special consideration for a person's biological and gender-related differences.

It is important to take time to focus on your overall health. However, as a female it is important that we take into consideration a few other key parts of our overall wellbeing. Taking care of your health can be through lifestyle choices, but also by regular checks such as breast self-examination and keeping up to date with your mammograms and cervical smears.

Physical Health Cancer

As we get older, the risk of developing cancer increases, especially past the age of 50. However, this does not mean we are at no risk at a younger age. Across the UK, 1 in 2 people will develop cancer in their lifetime. Therefore, it is important that you understand your own body and what symptoms to look out for. These may include:

- Breathlessness
- Croaky voice or hoarseness
- Persistent cough or coughing up blood
- Persistent bloating
- Loss of appetite
- Unusual breast changes
- Blood in your urine or problems urinating
- Unexplained weight loss

Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK, with an estimated 150 new cases every day (Cancer Research UK).

It is important to check your breasts regularly and at different stages of your cycle. There is no right or wrong way to check your breasts, however it is important to know how they usually feel and look so you can detect any abnormalities quickly. Look at your breasts in the mirror and pay attention to what is normal for you.

Both with your arms up and by your side, you want to gently palpate your breast tissue with 2-3 fingers, feeling around your breast, nipple and under your arm pit. You are checking for any lumps, tenderness, hard areas, change in skin texture and even discharge. If you do notice any changes, report them to your GP straight away.

Mammography is used to screen for breast cancer and involves taking x-rays of the breast tissue. Mammograms help to detect breast cancer early and in cases where the cancer is too small to feel or see.

Catching breast cancer early means it is easier to treat, therefore it is important that you attend your appointments even if you are self-examining regularly.

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Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer, or cancer of the cervix, often has no symptoms. However, abnormal vaginal bleeding can be an indicator, and this can occur between periods, before or after sex and after the menopause. If you have abnormal bleeding it does not necessarily mean you have cervical cancer, but it is best to speak with your GP straight away.

Due to the limited symptoms associated with cervical cancer it is important to attend your cervical screening appointments, also known as "smear tests". During the cervical screening, a small sample of cells are taken from the cervix before being examined for abnormalities under a microscope. Cervical screening may feel uncomfortable, but the staff are well trained, and you should never feel embarrassed or nervous to attend. It is always best to catch any abnormal cells early.

Cancer risk reduction

Alcohol – Drinking alcohol in excess is linked with an increased risk of developing cancer. Keep your intake within 14 units per week, ideally spread over several days.

Smoking – Smoking and inhaling second-hand smoke have both been linked with an increased risk of developing breast cancer. Staggeringly, smoking is also reported to double your risk of developing cervical cancer.

Exercise – Regular moderate or vigorous intensity exercise, such as brisk walking or running, has shown to significantly reduce the risk of developing cancer.

Aim to complete at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity AND/OR 75 minutes of vigorous intensity exercise in addition to 2 strength/ resistance sessions each week.

Nutrition – Carrying excess weight has been linked with an increased risk of breast cancer. Moderate your portion sizes and opt for more whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, and lean proteins.

For more information on how to reduce your risk of cancer visit the NHS One You website for tips and apps that will help you get on track.

Menopause

The menopause is a natural part of ageing that usually occurs between 45 and 55 years of age. However, some women will experience premature menopause before they reach 41 years of age.

The menopause occurs when the women's ovaries stop producing oestrogen, resulting in their periods stopping and they will no longer be producing eggs. Symptoms of the menopause will vary for each individual and may include:

- Irregular menstrual cycles
- Heavy bleeding might occur for a day or two
- Excessive sweating during night
- Hot flashes
- Vaginal dryness, itching and pain during sexual intercourse
- Frequent urinary tract infections
- Mood swings
- Fatigue
- Weight gain due to uneven fat distribution

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Treatment for the menopause

There are a range of treatments available to relieve the symptoms of the menopause. Not every treatment works for everyone and they can come with side-effects, we advise speaking with your GP who will help you find the best treatment for you.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) – HRT is used to replace the oestrogen that the ovaries are no longer producing. HRT can contain oestrogen or both oestrogen and progestogen and it can come in a range of forms including tablets, skin patches, gels, pessaries and rings.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) – CBT can be used as a form of treatment to help manage the symptoms of mood swings, low mood and anxiety. It is a tool that is used to develop practical ways of managing problems by providing new coping skills and useful strategies.

Managing symptoms of the menopause

Exercise – Exercising regularly throughout the menopause has been linked with a greater ability to cope with both the short-term and long-term symptoms of the menopause. During the menopause, the decrease in oestrogen results in bone mineral density reducing. Regular exercise and strength training can help maintain bone health.

Nutrition – Maintaining good nutrition is important all the time, but especially when going through the menopause. Opt for fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, healthy fats and lean proteins. Calcium and vitamin D should also be an important part of your diet to help maintain your bone strength.

Coronary Heart Disease

Cardiovascular diseases such as heart attacks are often seen as a male health issue, however this is not the case. In the UK, three women die of coronary heart disease every hour, so it is important to recognise the symptoms.

Coronary heart disease occurs when the blood supply to the heart is blocked or delayed by a build-up of fatty substances in the coronary artery. These fatty deposits develop due to damage to the blood vessel caused by smoking, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and other factors. If left untreated, this can lead to a heart attack.

Symptoms of coronary heart disease:

- Chest pain (angina)
- Shortness of breath
- Pain throughout the body
- Feeling faint
- Feeling sick (nausea)

Treatment for Coronary heart disease

Coronary heart disease cannot be cured, but it can be treated to help minimise the risk of problems such as heart attacks.

- **Angioplasty** – During an angioplasty, tiny balloons and stents are used to treat the narrowed heart arteries.
- **Surgery** – Types of surgery include a 'bypass' whereby an additional pathway is created using a blood vessel to enable blood to flow around the blockage.
- **Medicine** – These may include blood thinners, beta-blockers, statins.

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Coronary heart disease risk reduction

Exercise – Adhering to the government guidelines for exercise will help to maintain heart health, also helping to regulate blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Aim to do at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise every day.

Nutrition – Limiting your intake of foods high in saturated and trans-fats will help to lower cholesterol levels. Also, avoiding a high intake of salt, opting for foods high in magnesium and potassium will help to regulate your blood pressure.

Smoking – Stopping smoking or avoiding inhaling second-hand smoke will help to minimise the risk of damage to the blood vessels caused by cigarettes and cigars.

Mental Health

Mental health is “the mental and emotional state in which we feel able to cope with the normal stresses of everyday life”. We all have mental health, some days it may seem better than others. Hopefully, the following information will help you to understand yours better and what can be done to improve it.

Stress

Stress is not a diagnosed mental health condition; however it does have a significant impact on our mental health. Stress is the adverse reaction we have to pressure.

There are many contributing factors which impact how we deal with pressure, such as work, financial issues or stressors at home.

We each handle stress differently and it is important to understand what stress looks like for us. Some symptoms of stress may be:

- Struggling to switch off or 'racing thoughts
- Anxious, nervous or upset
- Irritable, aggressive or impatient
- Overwhelmed or overburdened

Anxiety

Anxiety is the feeling of being nervous, tense or on edge. With these feelings come a range of physical or behavioural sensations and symptoms, such as:

- A churning feeling in your stomach
- Pins and needles
- Feeling restless
- Faster breathing
- A faster, thumping or irregular heartbeat
- Headaches, backache or other aches and pains
- Feeling light-headed or dizzy

The feeling of anxiety is closely linked with our protective 'fight or flight' response and can be totally normal. However, if these symptoms or emotions become overbearing or last longer than 2 weeks, then it is time to speak with your GP.

Depression

Depression can range from mild to severe. Mild depression can mean feeling in low spirits, it does not stop you from doing your daily activities however it can make them seem harder than usual.

Whilst severe depression can be life threatening due to suicidal ideation or the feeling that you've given up the will to live.

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Symptoms of depression may include feeling:

- Down, upset or tearful
- Restless, agitated or irritable
- Empty, numb
- Isolated and unable to relate to other people
- You find little enjoyment or pleasure in activities you usually enjoy
- Feeling guilty or worthless

If you experience any symptoms of depression for more than two weeks, no matter how mild, speak with your GP.

Resources for your mental health

When experiencing poor mental health everything may seem harder than usually, socialising feels hard and energy levels may feel low.

But there are things you can do to improve your own mental health, but at the same time remember to seek support from friends, family and professionals.

Resources:

- NHS 5-ways to wellbeing: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/
- MIND UK: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/wellbeing/wellbeing/
- Smiling Mind: www.smilingmind.com.au/
- Mental Health Foundation: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-to-mental-health