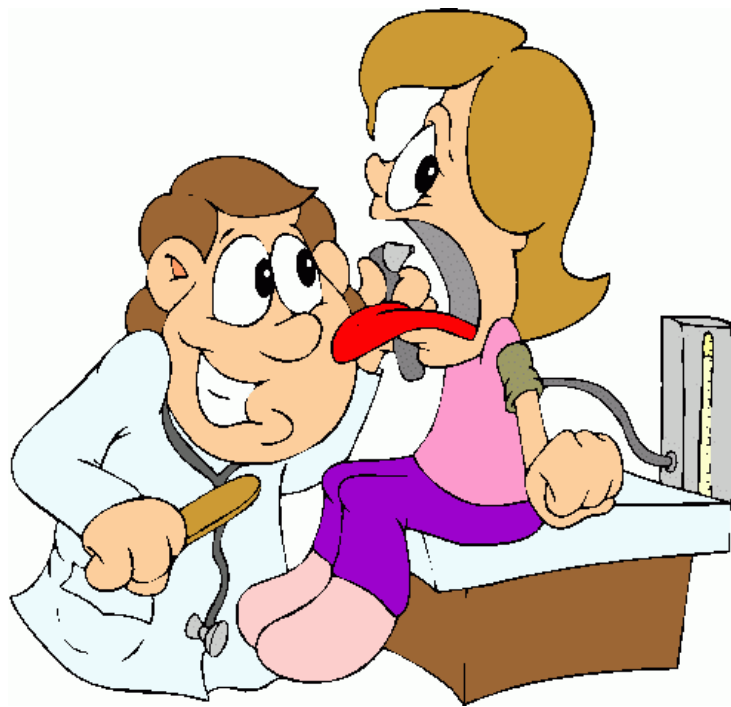


# I PRISSY

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## Ladies, are your health checks up-to-date?



By Eveline Gan

Like many working women, Sandy (not her real name) sets time aside for shopping, high tea and manicures despite her busy work schedule.

However, the manager, who is in her early 50s, admits that she is often "lazy" when it comes to health checkups. Unless her company requires her to do so, she does not go for regular health screenings even though she is at an age which puts her at risk of certain diseases.

Sandy, who requested to remain anonymous, lives by the motto of "why worry?".

"I think (health screenings) are scary, and I'd rather not find out if I have diseases like cancer. Anyway, I feel well so I don't see a need to go for screenings," she said.

Doctors TODAY spoke to said women like Sandy are not uncommon in this day and age, despite increasing awareness of women-related diseases.

"Awareness needs to be increased for a more positive attitude towards health screening. As per the Health Promotion Board, screening is mainly to find out if you have a particular disease or condition even if you do not have any symptoms and/or signs of disease," said Dr Wee Horng Yen, deputy head and senior consultant of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH).

In fact, by the time you do notice any symptoms, it might be too late as this often means the disease has already progressed.

Added obstetrician and gynaecologist Dr Quek Swee Chong, medical director of Pre-invasive and Screening Service at Parkway Gynaecology Screening and Treatment Centre: "The earlier we detect a particular disease, the better the chance of cure.

"It is important not to wait until there are signs or symptoms of disease before seeking medical attention, as these often only occur late in the disease process. In the case of cervical cancer, a Pap smear or HPV test can detect changes on the cervix even before cancer develops."

So just which health screenings should you go for, and at what age? Here is a list of essential health checks, recommended by the experts, for women across the ages.

#### **If you are under the age of 40**

- Check your Body Mass Index (BMI) yearly. Measuring your BMI is a test most people take for granted, but a too-high BMI that falls into the obese range can be a harbinger of many chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

- The same goes for hypertension screening. A normal blood pressure is typically less than 130/80 mmHg. The Health Promotion Board advises a blood pressure measurement check once every two years, or more as advised by your doctor.

- If you have a family history of hepatitis B infection, liver cancer or engage in high risk behaviour, check for hepatitis B. For those living with chronic hepatitis B, C or liver cirrhosis, get screened for liver cancer, advised Dr Wee.

- Catch any suspicious lumps in your breasts early. Dr Wee advised women aged 30 and above to perform breast self-examinations. This should be done every month after the menstrual period, added Dr Quek.

- If you have had sexual intercourse, get screened for cervical cancer from the age of 25, recommended Dr Quek. You should do this every one to three years until you reach the age of 69. Other than the Pap smear, a newer method of screening is also available using the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) test. According to Dr Quek, this is found to be highly effective for women over the age of 30. The test involves taking a swab from the cervix and testing it for strains of HPV

that are known to cause cervical cancers.

- If you are planning to start a family, Dr Quek recommended undergoing a general health check to determine if there are any issues which may adversely affect a pregnancy. They include conditions like anaemia, thyroid disease, diabetes and hypertension. In addition, you might want to also check for infections such as Hepatitis B, syphilis, etc.

### **If you are in your 40s**

- Continue regular checks for hypertension and obesity (BMI), as well as cervical cancer.

- Add on screening tests for diabetes (fasting glucose test) and cholesterol (fasting lipids). If your first screening results are normal, you can screen for these chronic disease once every three years, said Dr Wee.

- Other than the monthly self-examinations, you should also go for annual mammograms until the age of 50, advised Dr Quek.

### **If you are aged 50 and above**

- Include a yearly faecal occult blood test which screens for colorectal cancer, advised Dr Wee. But if you are at a higher risk of the disease (family history), the screening should start from the age of 45 onwards, he added.

- Continue with cervical cancer screenings, as well as mammograms. However, at this age group, Dr Quek said the interval for mammograms can be increased to one every two years until you reach the age of 69.

- Dr Wee recommends getting a bone mineral density check after the age of 65, as postmenopausal women lose the protective effect of oestrogen which can lead to osteoporosis. In Singapore, the number of hip fractures in women over the age of 50 due to osteoporosis is eight-fold more than the number of breast cancer cases, noted Dr Kevin Lee, medical director of Singapore Medical Group's Centre for Joint and Cartilage Surgery. Dr Lee recommended using the Osteoporosis Self-assessment Tool for Asians to assess your risk of developing osteoporosis ([www.osteoporosis.org.sg/#!information-for-patients](http://www.osteoporosis.org.sg/#!information-for-patients)).

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