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Preventive Health checkup: An investment for a healthy life

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Dr Shalini Joshi, Senior Consultant - Internal Medicine, Fortis Hospitals, Bannerghatta Road, Bengaluru, talks about the need to invest in the regular screening of health

Investing in health gives you enormous benefits over time. Indeed, health is not valued till sickness comes. Maintaining good health should be the primary focus for everyone. Good health is the groundwork of all happiness.

It is a good idea to visit a doctor regularly, even if you feel healthy. The purpose of these visits is to check for current or emerging medical problems, assess your risk of inheriting disorders and cancers which runs in the family. If you have high-risk factors, such as a family history of a condition like diabetes, early premature heart disease, high cholesterol, it may be more likely that you will develop a particular disease. Regular checks may help your doctor pick up early warning signs. As you get older, keeping an eye on your health becomes more important. It is important to discuss the need for adult vaccinations and make sure you are up to date.

After taking a complete history and physical exam your doctor may suggest a regular exercise schedule, nutritious diet and prompt you to maintain a healthy lifestyle. It is important to be physically active and maintain a healthy weight to avoid lifestyle diseases like fatty liver, obesity, hormonal imbalances, heart diseases and diabetes, to name a few. Vitamin D3 and B12 deficiencies are very common in the population, more so in recent times because of indoor habitation.

Lockdowns during the COVID19 pandemic have given rise to homebound lifestyles, resulting in a drastic increase in time spent sitting in front of a computer screen for online education, work, and entertainment. This sedentary lifestyle is making people overweight - a matter of great concern. Weight gain puts a load on the spine. Together with weakened abdominal and back muscles, it would cause worsening of back pain. Obesity often results from taking in more calories than are burned by exercise and normal daily activities, while genetic factors play a significant role as well.

Preventive health checkups are a comprehensive assessment of your overall health which includes a detailed history a physical exam, battery of blood tests and imaging studies as advised by your healthcare professional. Your doctor will also check and record your weight, height to calculate your body mass index (BMI) and suggest solutions. Dental exams, eye checks and hearing tests should be done every year or so, to prevent major problems later.

Blood pressure is usually checked either by a nurse or a doctor at each visit. Usually, the patient would not be able to "feel" their blood pressure is high, making this condition a silent killer.

Routine blood tests including glucose, cholesterol, thyroid profile, uric acid, kidney and liver tests are recommended to screen for various ailments. Heart health is assessed by taking a good history, assessing your risk factors like smoking and alcohol, and conducting ECG, 2-D Echo and treadmill stress test (TMT) for determining your cardiac risk.

Cancer screening guidelines for women recommend doing a Pap smear for cervical cancer and mammogram for breast cancer screening. Examination of prostate and blood tests are done for prostate cancer screening in men. Awareness of these important tests is very low in the general population.

Osteoporosis screening is recommended for postmenopausal women and to a person who has any of the risk factors like long-term steroid use, low body weight, smoking, heavy alcohol use or a family history of osteoporosis. Make sure you discuss this aspect with your doctor. Dental check-ups for dentition issues, audiometry tests to detect hearing loss and regular eye checks to look for cataract in the elderly population is advised.

You should make it a point to discuss adult immunization with your doctor – either at a regular visitor during the preventive health check-up. The following vaccines could potentially be lifesaving, so don’t forget to learn more about it: Influenza (taken annually), tetanus-diphtheria-pertussis booster (every 10 years), pneumococcal vaccine (taken above 60 years of age), shingles or herpes zoster vaccine (currently not available in India).

Depending on the results of those tests, your doctor may then want to provide a course of treatment, investigate further, or refer you to a specialist for diagnosis and treatment. Regular checkups help doctors in diagnosing the disease early which makes the treatment more effective. If the blood glucose or cholesterol is borderline high, it can be managed aggressively with lifestyle changes and avoid frank diabetes. The good news is that even modest weight loss can mitigate or prevent the health problems associated with obesity. Detection of potentially life-threatening health conditions or diseases at an early stage can increase the chance for a positive outcome. At times, early diagnosis may reduce the risk of undergoing complicated procedures and high-risk surgeries.
A regular health checkup can help you save money in the long run, so it is a good investment, not an expenditure. As the saying goes: Prevention is better than Cure!