

May is the month to celebrate all of the moms and mother figures in our lives as well as National Women's Health. It is also a great time to remind all of those wonderful women that we love to take care of themselves. Women are often so focused on being caregivers that they forget to focus some attention on themselves, and most importantly, their health.

"Preventative measures are of paramount importance for women wishing to achieve a long healthy lifespan," explains Melissa Mang, a registered nurse and family nurse practitioner with Southern Pines Women's Clinic.

Rather than waiting for a health problem to present itself, be proactive. The themes are pretty simple – get moving, eat a healthy diet, stop smoking, wear sunscreen and go for an annual physical. Following through with these suggestions can be challenging, but completely worth the effort.

The silent killer of women is heart disease. According to the Mayo Clinic, more women than men die of this every year, partially because the symptoms are so hard to recognize. Women often don't think about heart disease since breast, cervical and ovarian cancers are considered "women's ailments." Although some of the risk factors for heart disease we are powerless against – family history, sex or age – other risk factors can be minimized.

"Women need to be sure to have a primary care physician and to have a check-up every year, or twice a year if you are over 60," says Dr. Amelia Jeyapalan, a general surgeon at Pinehurst Surgical Clinic. "It is vital to have your cholesterol, blood pressure and weight checked regularly."

Jeyapalan also emphasizes telling your doctor of any problems with shortness of breath, as this can be a

warning sign of heart disease.

In addition to routine screenings for heart disease, there are a slew of other important preventive screenings to remember.

"Women and men need to have a colonoscopy at age 50 and then once every 10 years after that if there are no concerns," says Jeyapalan.

She also stresses the importance of checking for skin abnormalities and growths. "People talk about skin cancers," she says, "but I can't tell you how many people I see who don't get them checked. Skin cancers that are detected and removed early are almost always curable."

Jeyapalan recommends having a doctor "do a full-body exam, to assure you that any existing spots, freckles, or moles are normal or treat any that may not be."

Mang also points out that women over 65 should have bone mineral density screenings, and screenings for thyroid disease should begin at age 35.

Women also need to

be sure to have regular mammograms and Pap smears. However, the frequency of both of these exams is a controversial topic these days. According to Jeyapalan, "most medical societies still recommend starting mammograms at age 40," even though there are some governmental bodies pushing for starting the screenings at age 50.

Jeyapalan personally sees high-risk breast cancer patients every year and those without a history of breast, cervical, colon or uterine cancer every two years, but there are a variety of factors that your doctor can discuss regarding how frequently an individual should be screened.

Pap testing for cervical cancer is also a hot-button topic right now. Dr. Cile Williamson, a gynecologist in Pinehurst, says that "the days of routine yearly Paps

The gift of health

By MICHELLE GOETZL

Photography by DIANA MATTHEWS

are over,” due mainly to the advent of HPV testing and vaccines. Williamson explains that women with normal Paps with negative HPV screenings can now go three to five years between Paps.

“It can be intimidating to think about and can be scary not to do a Pap, but a Pap does not equal a pelvic exam. It is just a small part of your yearly women's exam,” says Williamson, who advises women still see their doctors on an annual basis.

A lot of older women, especially, are finding it difficult to adjust to the change in screenings because they are so used to having the procedure and waiting for the results. What is important to remember is that Pap smears were not 100 percent accurate, and the new screening procedures reduce false positives.

Taking care of your health isn't only something that you focus on in the doctor's office. More and more health professionals push the importance of maintaining a healthy weight and diet. Over 60 percent of women over the age of 40 are overweight. Between 1980 and 2010, the average weight in America increased by 30 pounds, making it more difficult to be able to tell what is healthy normal versus socially normal without an accurate check of your body mass index, a number calculated by an individual's height and weight.

“When you start looking at the implications of weight gain, they are horrible,” says Williamson. “Checking for cancer is harder, because it is harder to see through dense breast tissue. Uterine cancer, the most common gynecological cancer, is directly related to obesity because fat tissue produces estrogen. Obesity also causes high blood pressure, higher cholesterol levels, diabetes and post-menopausal bleeding.”

Maintaining a healthy weight can seem overwhelming. It is easy to say that you are going to start exercising, but often hard to follow through.

Sara Hauber, an advanced functional movement

specialist and back-pain specialist in the Triangle area, acknowledges that the first and often hardest hurdle is simply not knowing what to do.

“Like the vast majority of people, women 40 and older have never had any education about their body, how it works or how to manipulate it with exercise,” says Hauber.

Her belief is that your best bet to overcoming the hurdle is to consult “a qualified, experienced, fitness professional.” However, Hauber's reasoning isn't about keeping personal trainers in business, but rather how

qualified trainers can “guide women to the proper level of exertion to reach their goals without hurting themselves.” She tells a story of a 72-year-old woman who started lifting weights when her sister died from a stroke and has since become a competitive body-builder. While most women don't need to go to that extreme, it is never too late to be active and fit.

“Get a workout buddy,” says Hauber, who emphasizes having a dedicated partner with the same goals. “Then plan a workout schedule and stick to it. You don't break a date with your friends, and you should consider your buddy workouts just as important as a social date with your friends.”

The health benefits of keeping your weight in check and including a workout regimen are numerous.

“Women need strength, period,” says Hauber. “Building lean muscle improves metabolism, making fat gain less of a problem as we age. Proper weight-bearing exercise is also the best defense against osteoporosis and bone thinning.

Staying active is the absolute key to warding off pain and physical dysfunction.”

Exercise also plays a vital role in stress management, something that we all need to focus on.

“Proper diet and exercise are natural stress relievers,” says Williamson. “Stress is a huge factor in our lives, and one statistic shows that 80 percent of disease is stress-related.”



Dr. Amelia Jeyapalan examines a female patient. She recommends screenings for high-risk breast cancer patients every year and those without a history of breast, cervical, colon or uterine cancer every two years.

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Hands on: Trainer Sara Hauber helps a student strengthen her back by doing the "floor swim," one of the most important parts of an exercise routine for women over 40.

Stress can cause high blood pressure. It is a contributing factor in depression and anxiety. Williamson mentions that stress even plays a role in managing menopausal symptoms.

“Stress can increase negative behaviors such as smoking, drinking or drug use and can add to the risk of developing diabetes, ulcers, obesity and atherosclerosis,” adds Mang.

Our accelerated lives are much harder on our bodies. We are living longer, but we are also working longer, not taking vacations and dealing with added chemicals in our foods. To counter-balance the stressors in our lives, get active.

Jeyapalan urges her patients to find something they love to do and then get involved, whether it is with church, a hobby or a book club.

“By getting involved, you can talk to others who are going through the same things that you are going through,” says Jeyapalan.

This Mother's Day and this month, shower the women in your life (or yourself) with a different kind of gift. Schedule a spa day with your mother, daughter, sister or friend and then go with them to pamper yourself and enjoy the time together. For an aging parent, schedule their health appointments and go with them for support and for an extra set of ears. Find a workout buddy or start a walking club. The most meaningful gift we can give is the gift of health. 🧘

The Mayo Clinic focuses on 6 key preventive measures that women can focus on to keep their hearts healthy. Not surprisingly, these items are keys to focus on as general principles of keeping healthy.

1. Don't smoke or use tobacco.
2. Exercise for 30 minutes on most days of the week.
3. Eat a heart healthy diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Beans and low-fat sources of protein are also important while you limit your intake of saturated and trans-fats.
4. Maintain a healthy weight.
5. Get enough quality sleep.
6. Get regular health screenings on blood pressure, cholesterol levels and diabetes.

