

# Getting the right care to stay healthy as you age

## Tests and treatments you need— and others you may not

**Taking care of your health is important at each stage of life—but especially as you get older.**

Here's a quick guide to some of the most common tests and treatments for older adults. It's based on advice from medical experts as part of the Choosing Wisely campaign. It can help you talk with your doctor about the care you need to stay healthy. It can also help you avoid tests and treatments you may not need. Some of these can harm you. Others are just a waste of money.



To learn more about how to stay well as you age, go to [www.choosingwisely.org/patient-resources](http://www.choosingwisely.org/patient-resources)



*An initiative of the ABIM Foundation*



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# 5 tests and treatments to get

Most people should get these tests and treatments.

## 1 Get these routine screenings.

These screenings tell you if you have a health problem. That way, you can get the treatment you need.

**Blood pressure.** Get this test every one or two years.

**Cholesterol.** Get this test at least once every five years if you are:

- > A man who is 35 or older, **or**
- > A woman who is 45 or older and is at risk of heart disease (for instance, if you have high blood pressure or a family history of heart disease).

**Type 2 diabetes.** Get this test every three to five years if you:

- > Have high blood pressure, **or**
- > Are at risk for type 2 diabetes (for instance, if you weigh too much).



## 2 Get a flu shot each year.

This is one of the best ways to protect yourself from the flu. And even if you do get the flu, it will probably be milder. Get the flu vaccine as early in the flu season as you can.

## 3 Stay up to date on other shots.

Vaccines protect you from certain diseases. And they aren't just for kids. Adults need them, too.

**Tetanus and diphtheria shot.** Get this every 10 years. Ask your doctor when to start, based on the vaccines you had as a teenager or pre-teen.

**Shingles shot.** Get this when you turn 60.

**Pneumonia shot.** Get this when you are 65 (or sooner, if your doctor recommends it). There are two types. Ask your doctor which types to get, and when.

**Whooping cough shot.** Get this once in adulthood, especially if you spend time with young kids.



## 4 Get a bone density test if you are a woman.

A bone density test is a type of X-ray. It measures the strength of your bones.

- If you are a woman, get this test when you are 65.
- If you are a man 70 or older, ask your doctor how this test could help or harm you.
- If you are a younger woman or man, ask your doctor if you are at risk for early bone loss. In that case, you may need this test sooner.

If your test shows weak bones, your doctor may recommend follow-up tests.



## 5 Get these cancer screenings.

These screenings can find cancer early. That makes it easier to treat.

**Mammogram.** This test checks for breast cancer.

- If you are a woman age 50 to 74, get this test at least every two years.
- If you are an older or younger woman, talk to your doctor about your family's history with breast cancer. Together you can decide if you need mammograms.

**Colon cancer test.** Get a fecal occult blood test each year or a colonoscopy every 10 years if you are:

- Age 50 to 75, **or**
- Younger than age 50 with a family history of colon cancer.

**CT scan for lung cancer.** Get this test if you are at high risk for lung cancer. That means you:

- Are age 55 to 80, **and**
- Smoked at least two packs of cigarettes a day for at least 15 years, **or**
- Smoked at least one pack a day for at least 30 years

Ask your doctor about the risks of test results that are abnormal but harmless. Some test results may lead to even more tests – some of which you probably don't need.

## 5 tests and treatments to question

Most people don't need these tests and treatments. Talk with your doctor about how they could help or harm you.

### 1 Take antibiotics only if you really need them.

These drugs cure health problems caused by bacteria, like strep throat. But they don't help health problems caused by a virus, like the common cold. They also don't help with skin problems, except those caused by bacteria.

If you use antibiotics that you don't need, they may not work as well when you do need them. So before you take these drugs, ask your doctor if you really need them.

### 2 You likely don't need a vitamin D screening.

Get this test only if you are likely to be low in vitamin D. Maybe you just need a little more sun. Or, maybe you just need to eat foods high in vitamin D. These include meat, poultry, fatty fish, and food with added vitamin D. And ask your doctor if you should take a vitamin D pill. Too much vitamin D can harm your kidneys or other organs.

### 3 You likely don't need imaging tests for pain in your lower back.

Imaging tests like X-rays, CT scans, and MRIs have risks. They may also lead to tests that you don't need and treatments that don't work. So get these tests only if you have other symptoms. These symptoms may include weight loss that you can't explain, fever, loss of bowel or bladder control, and loss of feeling or strength in your legs.

Your pain will likely go away on its own in about a month. Meanwhile, take more walks. And try pain drugs that you can buy without a prescription, like Tylenol, Advil, or Aleve.

### 4 You likely don't need these cancer screenings.

**Pap test.** This test checks for cervical cancer. If you are:

- A woman age 65 or older and your prior Pap tests were normal, you don't need this test.
- A woman age 30 to 65, get this test every five years. Get a test for HPV at the same time.
- More likely to have cervical cancer (for instance, if you had cervical cancer before), you may need this test more often. Talk with your doctor.

**PSA test.** This test checks for prostate cancer. Get this test only if you are at high risk for prostate cancer (for instance, if you had prostate cancer before).

### 5 Take opioid pain drugs only if you really need them.

Opioids (narcotics) are strong drugs. They can help manage pain that lasts for a short time. But they are not the best way to treat pain that lasts for a long time. This includes arthritis pain, pain in your lower back, and headaches.

It's easy to get addicted to these drugs. And people can die from taking too many of these drugs. So ask your doctor about other ways to ease your pain.