



# Monthly Health Watch

News with a Monthly Health Theme

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## Five Health Screenings Women Should Never Ignore

By Joanne Armstrong, M.D., Senior Medical Director, Aetna Health Care Management

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, a reminder to all women to stay vigilant in maintaining their health. This is a great time of year to make sure you are up-to-date on all of your wellness visits and checkups. Plus, Health Care Reform legislation now requires that the majority of plans renewed on or after September 23, 2010 fully cover preventive health services. So which wellness visits and health screenings should you never miss? Read on to learn more.



Joanne Armstrong, M.D.

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- Aetna Supports First National Study on Community-Based Use of Genetic Tests for Cancer Risk
- Annual Open Enrollment Period Begins Next Month
- Spotlight on Aetna.com Medical Search

**1) Mammograms** – According to the American Cancer Society, about every three minutes a woman in the United States is diagnosed with breast cancer. Your best defense is to lead a healthy lifestyle and to find breast cancer in its earliest stages. Mammograms, which are X-rays of the breast tissue, are the most common tool used by doctors to detect breast cancer in women. The American Cancer Society recommends that healthy women age 40 and older receive a mammogram each year. Women in their 20's and 30's who are not considered high risk are recommended to have a clinical breast exam by a health care professional at least every three years.<sup>1</sup>

**2) Pelvic Exam and Pap Test** – Be sure to schedule regular gynecological checkups every year. During the pelvic exam, your doctor may take a sample of cells from inside the cervix, called a Pap smear, for lab analysis. The Pap smear is the most common method to find the abnormal cells that can lead to cervical cancer. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), cervical cancer screening should begin for most women at age 21 regardless of sexual activity. If test results are normal (negative), repeat testing should occur every two years for women ages 20 through 29 years of age. For women greater than 30 years of age, if three consecutive pap test results are normal, then screening can be spaced out to every three years. As an alternative for women over the age of 30, cervical cancer screening can also include testing for a virus called Human Papillomavirus (HPV).<sup>2</sup> HPV testing is not recommended for cervical cancer screening in women less than 30 years of age. At your checkup, you may also want to consider asking your doctor if she would recommend testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Many

<sup>1</sup> American Cancer Society. [Recommendations for early breast cancer detection.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [The Pap Test brochure.](#) The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. December 2009.

of these infections are highly treatable or even curable, but can compromise your health if they are left untreated.

- 3) Cholesterol Screening** – High cholesterol is one of the major risk factors for heart disease or a heart attack. Heart disease is the number one killer of women in the United States and each year over one million people in the United States have heart attacks.<sup>3</sup> There are two kinds of cholesterol: low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or “bad cholesterol”; and high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or “good cholesterol.” Too much LDL cholesterol can build up and cause hardened or blocked arteries, potentially leading to heart attack or stroke. Higher levels of HDL cholesterol have been linked with reduced risk of heart attacks. In general, adults older than 20 should try to keep their total cholesterol level below 200 milligrams per deciliter. That includes keeping LDL cholesterol below 100 and HDL cholesterol at 60 milligrams or more.

Although in some cases high cholesterol can run in families, the majority of the risk factors for developing high cholesterol and heart disease are due to lifestyle factors such as smoking, poor diet and lack of exercise. To lower your cholesterol, your doctor may recommend that you change your lifestyle or may also prescribe drugs.

- 4) Blood Pressure Screening** – Make sure to get your blood pressure checked at least once every two years. Most doctors do this automatically at routine checkups. High blood pressure means you can be at an increased risk for heart attack, heart failure or stroke. It also can be an indication of kidney or liver problems, or other diseases such as diabetes.<sup>4</sup> Your blood pressure is considered high if you have a reading of 140/90 or higher.<sup>5</sup>
- 5) Bone Density Test** – All women over the age of 65 are encouraged to be screened regularly for osteoporosis with a bone density test. Osteoporosis is a disease characterized by loss of the bone tissue. A decrease in bone density can make it easier for bones to fracture. Contrary to popular belief, osteoporosis is not just an inevitable part of aging — it can be prevented. According to the National Osteoporosis Foundation, a balanced diet rich in calcium and vitamin D, physical exercise using weights, and an overall healthy lifestyle with no smoking and limited alcohol consumption can help prevent the onset of osteoporosis.<sup>6</sup> If you are diagnosed with osteoporosis, your doctor may prescribe certain medications to help you retain bone density.

## **Aetna Supports First National Study on Community-Based Use of Genetic Tests for Cancer Risk**

The Aetna Foundation recently announced that it will fund a two-year study to determine whether women who are at the highest risk for breast cancer are receiving access to genetic testing to help identify markers for the disease before it develops.

The study will involve about 13,000 Aetna members. It will be led by the University of South Florida and Georgetown University, in collaboration with the American Cancer Society.

The study will investigate patterns of use of genetic counseling and genetic testing for genes called BRCA1 and BRCA2, which can result in inherited breast and/or ovarian cancer. There is valid concern that some women are receiving this test unnecessarily, while others, particularly among racial and ethnic minorities, as well as poorer women, should be receiving these critical tests and are not. This study may validate the need for specific strategies to eliminate barriers to these tests and help improve the health outcomes among high-risk poor or minority women.

For more information, read our press release, [Aetna Supports First National Study on Community-Based](#)

<sup>3</sup> National Cholesterol Education Program. [High Blood Cholesterol: What You Need To Know.](#)

<sup>4</sup> Mayo Clinic. [High Blood Pressure Dangers: Hypertension's Effects on the Body.](#)

<sup>5</sup> Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. [Women: Stay Healthy at Any Age – Checklist for Your Next Checkup.](#)

<sup>6</sup> National Osteoporosis Foundation. [Prevention brochure.](#)

## Annual Open Enrollment Period Begins This Month!

Be smart about choosing your benefits for the upcoming year to make sure you get the best coverage for your family at the best price. Here are some tips:

- 1) **Do research to find the best plan for your needs.** Consider the cost of the plan you are choosing, which benefits are available through your plan, and whether your doctor is in the insurer's network.
- 2) **Find out what options are available to you through your employer,** such as a Flexible Spending Account.
- 3) **Make a list of your benefits priorities.** To find the best plan for you, consider how often you and your family visit the doctor and whether you go to specialists regularly.
- 4) **Look for online resources available through your plan,** such as quality information and cost comparison tools.
- 5) **Download or order your free copy of *[Navigating Your Health Benefits For Dummies](#)*.** The guide's tips can help you choose the health benefits plan that's right for you.

To read more money-saving tips for open enrollment, visit:

<http://www.besmartaboutyourhealth.com/choose-the-right-benefits-for-you/article/show/choosing-health-benefits/>.

### ***Spotlight on Aetna.com Medical Search***

Looking for reliable medical information related to your individual health concerns? We recently added a new search function to our website that provides personalized health and health benefits information based on thousands of medical search terms such as breast cancer, diabetes, or asthma. This new search feature can provide information based on your zip code, such as the estimated cost of a procedure, doctors in your area who perform the service, health information from Aetna IntelliHealth<sup>®</sup>, and Aetna coverage policies for treatments related to the disease or condition. To use the search, go to [www.aetna.com](http://www.aetna.com) and enter a medical term at the top right of the screen in the search box.