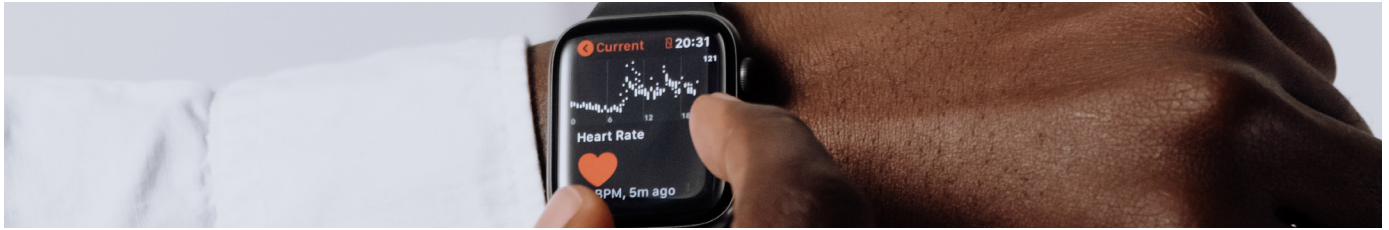


Proactive healthcare: why health screening could save your life



Prevention is better than cure

It's no secret that when it comes to your health, prevention is better than cure and, if you are going to be ill, the earlier you know, the more control you will have of your recovery.

But when you feel ok, it's easy to take your health for granted – even though you might already be ill.

Many serious conditions have no noticeable symptoms in the early stages. So, while ignorance may be bliss in some circumstances, with regards to your health, the more you know the better.

Health screening can help to improve your long-term health in two main ways:

1. By identifying your risk of developing some potentially life-threatening conditions, it can allow you to avoid them completely just by making a few adjustments to your lifestyle.
2. By enabling early diagnosis of diseases such as cancer, it increases your chances of making a full recovery exponentially. So even if it's too late for prevention, early detection means they are much easier to cure.

That's why health screening and generally taking a more proactive approach to healthcare are high on the government's list of priorities for the 2020s; it is keen to make the "decade of proactive, predictive, and personalised prevention".ⁱ

What is a proactive approach to healthcare?

According to the Oxford Dictionary, proactive means "creating or controlling a situation" rather than responding to it after the event. In other words, being proactive puts you in control.

A proactive approach to healthcare, meanwhile, involves getting ahead of the curve when it comes to your health and wellbeing so you can enjoy good health for longer.

Sussex Community NHS Trust has been testing a more proactive approach in its catchment area, with very promising results.ⁱⁱ

Its findings include:

"Patients receiving proactive care describe high levels of satisfaction with the approach: comments such as 'we are very grateful for all the support we've had' are not uncommon."

"The results of a pilot scheme in which a pharmacist worked within a proactive care team show safer more effective patient care, fewer hospital admissions, and reduced costs."

What is health screening?

According to the NHS website, health screening is "a way of identifying apparently healthy people who may have an increased risk of a particular condition".

Predictive and pre-emptive, it's one of the best ways to increase our "health spans", or the number of years we can live without health conditions affecting our quality of life. There are various NHS health screening programmes in place as a result.

Not everyone is invited for screenings, though; whether you are offered health screenings for different conditions depends on your age, your sex, and – in some cases – your medical history.

While some screening tests are only offered to new-born babies, others such as abdominal aortic aneurysm screening and breast screening are only offered to men and women over a certain age.

The government is planning to improve the screening system, including introducing more advanced technology such as artificial intelligence and genomics, as part of its drive to prevent more conditions having the chance to develop.

In the meantime, however, health screening is also available, and often included within many private medical insurance policies. WPA cash plan policyholders, for example, have the option to include scans and screens as part of their cover.

And even if you don't have private medical insurance, you can pay for a private health check that includes blood and urine tests, as well as healthier living advice designed to help you minimise your individual risk factors.

Did you know?

Early diagnosis is also important for our mental health. For autism and other neurodevelopmental or behavioural conditions, for example, an early diagnosis can make a big difference to a child's development by allowing them access to the help they need.

Common types of health screening

Widely practised types of health screening include:

Abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) screening

AAA screening, which is done via ultrasound, is designed to spot swelling in the aorta, which is the main blood vessel that pumps blood from the heart around the body.

If a swelling in the aorta is not treated, it can burst and cause life-threatening bleeds inside the stomach. But prior to that, many people have no symptoms.

Did you know?

Aneurysms are more common in men; that's why the NHS offers AAA screening to men when they reach the age of 65.

Blood pressure tests

Your blood pressure is the force that your blood exerts on the walls of your arteries. If it's too high, it can weaken your heart and damage the walls of your arteries, increasing the risk of heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease.

Fortunately, it's quick and easy to check using a cuff that fits around your upper arm.

! Know your numbers

Around 30% of adults in England have high blood pressure, but many don't realise as they often have no symptoms.

Bowel cancer screening

Bowel cancer screening doesn't diagnose cancer, but it can detect potential problems before symptoms start to show.

With this type of screening, you receive a testing kit, called a Faecal Occult Blood Test, through the post and send your own stool samples for analysis.

? Did you know?

Bowel cancer is the fourth most common cancer in the UK and the sooner it is detected, the easier it is to treat.

Breast screening

Regular breast screening can help to pick up breast cancer early enough to dramatically increase your chances of surviving it.

Again, it's quick and easy and involves having an x-ray taken of each breast. X-rays of this kind are called mammograms.

! Know your numbers

Data collected between 2013 and 2017 showed that 100% of women diagnosed with stage 1 breast cancer survived for at least one year after diagnosis. However, for those diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer, the one-year survival rate fell to just 66%.ⁱⁱⁱ

General health tests

Understanding key health markers and how your body is functioning supports you to make wise decisions about how to boost your health and vitality. Tests include investigating your cholesterol status, immune system function, red blood cells, blood sugar balance (a useful indicator for Diabetes) and liver function.

! Know your numbers

Almost 1 million people are unaware they are living with Type 2 Diabetes. 50% of the population have Vitamin D insufficiency and iron deficiency anaemia causes more than 57,000 emergency admissions to UK hospitals each year.^{iv}

Understanding your health screening results

When it comes to health screening, a normal or negative result is good news as it means you are at low risk of having the condition concerned.

This doesn't mean you will never develop it or should not screen for it again in the future, but it does mean you probably don't have to worry about it for the moment.

If you have a higher-risk or positive result, you will be offered further diagnostic tests to confirm whether you have the condition or would benefit from receiving treatment of any kind.

You should also be offered advice regarding any further steps you should take to improve your chances of living in good health for longer.

Sources

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