

MEDICAL MOMENTS

Health Disparities in Preventive Screenings for African Americans

Preventive health screenings are important for everyone, yet these simple and routine things are not readily available to some.

Nothing in life is perfect, medicine included. The health care system has not figured out a way to screen for every illness or cancer, but it does offer great screening tools for some. “As a family physician, I come across many people who don’t utilize preventive screenings for various reasons, but some of them truly have limited barriers to getting good care,” says Samantha Somwaru, M.D., a family medicine physician at Mayo Clinic Health System — Northland in Barron. “Racial and social disparities are some examples that continue to exist and affect the entire country, especially the Black population. Each must be examined and addressed to reduce health disparities and save lives.” Dr. Somwaru says. The list below is not exhaustive or all-inclusive, but represents some pressing conditions.

Self-advocacy tips

“Society and the U.S. health care system must address factors contributing to health disparities,” Dr. Somwaru says. “Yet, there are things that patients can do to advocate for their health and the health of their families.”

- **Ask questions.** It’s important that all patients feel comfortable with their health care teams and ask questions. Ask what you can do to lower your risk of specific diseases and conditions. Be honest about how you are feeling.
- **Gather family history.** Talk with relatives about their health. Documenting your family health history can help you and your health care team understand if you have an increased risk of developing certain conditions that are present in your family.

- **Seek a second opinion if necessary.** Don’t be afraid to get another opinion if you feel that your concerns aren’t heard or addressed fully.
- **Access virtual care.** Ask your health care team about virtual care options to make getting the care you need easier, especially if transportation, work or child care is a barrier.
- **Get vaccinated.** Vaccines aren’t just for kids. They also protect against many diseases and conditions for adults, including influenza and COVID-19. Your health care team will recommend which vaccines are right for you.

Screening recommendations

Your health care team will recommend screenings based on your age, gender and family history.

- **Blood pressure** This should be less than 120/80 for most adults.
- **Breast cancer** It is recommended that women have a mammogram every year starting at age 40.
- **Cervical cancer** For women, the recommendation is to have a Pap smear and HPV testing every three to five years starting at age 21. An HPV vaccination is recommended starting at age 11 through 26. Some people may qualify for the HPV vaccine through age 45 based on shared decision-making with their health care teams.
- **Cholesterol** Starting at age 18, have your cholesterol checked every four to six years.
- **Colon cancer** Screening is recommended starting at age 45. If you choose a colonoscopy, it is generally repeated

every 10 years if no abnormalities are found and you don’t have an increased risk of colon cancer. There are other forms of screening available, including kits that are mailed right to your house. Talk to your health care team to find out which option is best for you.

- **Diabetes** If you have high blood pressure, are overweight or have a strong family history of diabetes, you should be screened for diabetes every three years. Starting at age 35, the recommendation is to be screened every three years.
- **Lung cancer** Screening is recommended for current or past smokers between the ages of 50 and 80 who have a heavy smoking history.
- **Osteoporosis** Women should be screened beginning at age 65, or younger if at increased risk.
- **Prostate cancer** Men should be screened after shared decision-making with their health care teams. Factors such as age and family history should be considered. This can start as early as 40 in the African American population.

“As a physician, it’s my job to take care of every person that comes into the clinic, yet, I understand the importance of recognizing and addressing health disparities that place my African American patients at an increased risk. Health disparities and health inequities are not new. They have been documented for decades and reflect discrimination and racism. Mayo Clinic is striving to eliminate health disparities within our communities and help prevent and reduce illness and premature death in underrepresented minority populations.”

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