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What are the recommended cancer screening tests?

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Several types of cancer can be detected early with regular screenings—and the earlier you catch it, the easier it is to treat. Cancer screening recommendations vary according to individual risk factors, such as age and family history.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends mammograms every other year starting at age 50 to screen for breast cancer. Some experts recommend starting mammograms as early as age 40, and people with risk factors may need more frequent screening.

The USPSTF recommends cervical cancer screening every three years starting at age 21. Women living with HIV are at greater risk and may be advised to start sooner. Pap tests and human papillomavirus (HPV) tests are both used for screening. There is currently no consensus recommendation for routine anal cancer screening, but some experts advise regular exams for gay and bisexual men with HIV. If detected early, cervical or anal dysplasia (abnormal cells) can be treated before they progress to cancer.

In May 2021, the USPSTF lowered its colorectal cancer screening age from 50 to 45. Colon cancer rates are rising among younger people, especially Black men. Screening approaches include tests that detect blood in the stool and colonoscopy, an examination of the inside of the colon for abnormal growths.

Chronic hepatitis B, hepatitis C, fatty liver disease and heavy alcohol use can lead to liver cirrhosis and liver cancer. Screening for liver cancer is not recommended for the general population, but people at increased risk should be screened regularly using blood tests or ultrasound imaging.

Lung cancer screening is recommended for current and former heavy smokers. In April 2021, the USPSTF updated its guidelines to recommend annual screening with CT scans for people ages 50 to 80 who have a 20 pack-year history of smoking (the equivalent of one pack a day for 20 years) and either still smoke or have quit within the past 15 years.

Experts disagree about the need for prostate cancer screening. Because it usually grows slowly, most men with prostate cancer will die of other causes. According to the USPSTF, prostate- specific antigen (PSA) blood test screening should be an individual decision based on risk factors and personal preferences.

Skin cancer can usually be success- fully treated if caught early, but melanoma is more likely to spread and become deadly. Although the USPSTF does not currently recommend routine skin cancer screening for people without symptoms, many experts advise regular self-exams and clinical examination to look for abnormal moles or sores that don’t heal.

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