

HEALTH SCREENING THROUGH THE AGES

Is it time for a full body check-up? **Stephanie Yap** finds out from the expert what you should be checking for at your age.

Ask yourself this: when was the last time I went to the doctor and had a full body check-up? One year ago? Two? Or maybe five? Almost no one likes going to the doctor, because people associate medical appointments with falling sick. And if you've always been blessed with good health, you might not feel the need to go to the doctor unless something is wrong. Though there is nothing wrong with that belief, isn't prevention always better than cure? Early detection and treatment is always better than finding out about your illness in the later stages, when more treatments are required.

"Health screenings are not only for those who have contracted a disease or fallen ill. It's for everyone who wants to prevent themselves from getting diseases. It's really essential for our own well-being," clarifies

Dr Sivah Sandrasakre, the chief medical officer of Columbia Asia Hospital Cheras. Diagnosing the disease early enables it to be managed, thereby reducing the likelihood of it spreading to other parts of the body. A check-up also allows you to be clued in on important health markers from your blood pressure to body

mass index (BMI), which together give you a better picture of your overall health.

Make it a point to schedule a health screening yearly. "All check-ups can be done by a general practitioner (GP) and if any abnormalities are found, your GP will refer you to a medical consultant or specialist

71% GO FOR CHECK-UPS ONCE A YEAR



AGES 18 - 39

"Usually, an 18-year-old would have completed all compulsory vaccinations like Bacillus Calmette–Guérin (BCG), Hepatitis B, Human Papillomavirus (HPV), Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) and others. After 18, it's advisable to screen for diseases as a standard precaution," Dr Sivah explains. At your first health screening, your GP checks your BMI to see if you're in the healthy range. According to a study published by British medical journal *The Lancet*, Malaysia is rated the top obese country in Asia with 49 per cent of women and 44 per cent of men found to be obese. "The proper way to combat this issue is by controlling your diet; it should be low in carbohydrates and high in protein," Dr Sivah suggests. "Exercise for at least 15 minutes a day. If you don't have time for that, try incorporating exercise routines into your everyday lifestyle like walking up the stairs instead of riding the elevator."

Next up are your vitals. "Vital signs are the measurement of your body's most basic functions and include blood pressure, body temperature, oxygen level and pulse rate," explains Dr Sivah. If you're diagnosed with elevated blood pressure now, there's a higher risk of your arteries getting clogged up when you grow older. "The normal blood pressure count is 120/80 mm Hg. Anything more than that, say 140/90 mm Hg, is considered hypertension; anything below 90/60 mm Hg is what we call hypotension – both are not good." People with low blood pressure are prone to getting heart diseases, stroke and even kidney damage. A recent study by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that pre-hypertension in young adults is linked to a higher

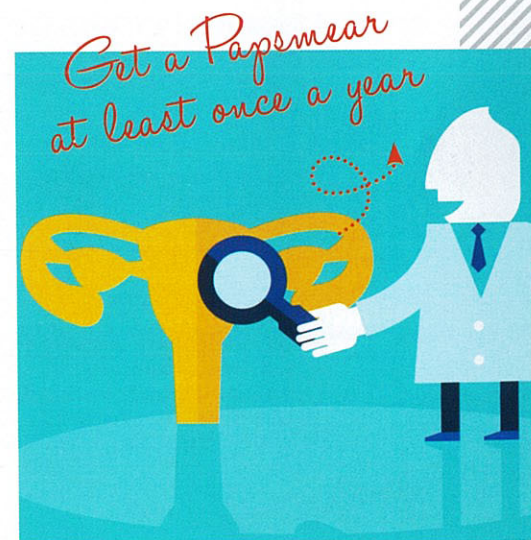
risk of calcium build-up in the heart arteries 25 years later.

Dr Sivah says the same principles apply to blood sugar and cholesterol levels. A normal fasting blood glucose level (obtained when you fast for eight hours) is between 70 to 99 mg/dL. If you have diabetes or a strong family history of the disease, Dr Sivah advises going for check-ups frequently to contain your blood sugar level. As for cholesterol, a healthy adult should have less than 200 mg/dL – anything more and you're at risk for a heart attack.

According to the National Cancer Society Malaysia (NCSM), one in 19 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer and 40 per cent of them will be below the age of 50. "Breast cancer is becoming increasingly common among young adults. Perform a self-examination at home and if you find any lumps or swelling, go for an ultrasound," recommends Dr Sivah.

Women in this age group also tend to be more sexually active and vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases like HPV, he cautions. An untreated HPV infection could lead to cervical cancer, which is the second most common cancer in Malaysia. "If you are not vaccinated against HPV, it's vital to get a Pap smear at least once a year to see if there are any changes to the cells in the cervix."

for treatment," says Dr Sivah. He stresses the importance of having a regular doctor who knows your medical history. "If you've been going for check-ups at one place, it's better to follow up with the same doctor who has all your documents and reports. Besides, maintaining a healthy relationship with your physician allows you to talk more openly about your conditions." What kind of screening you should go for depends on your age. Here, Dr Sivah shares his recommendations according to age group.



AGES 40 - 59

This is an important time for preventing health problems like diabetes, heart disease and breast cancer. In addition to testing cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar levels, Dr Sivah strongly recommends women aged 40 and above to have their breasts examined and get a mammogram annually, as breast cancer risk increases with age. You should also become familiar with the look and feel of your breasts to know what's normal for you. If you find any swelling or lumps, consult with your doctor quickly to find out the cause.

This is also the age where women experience menopause, which occurs when ovulation stops and monthly period ceases. A study done by University Kebangsaan Malaysia's Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology found that the average age for menopause in Malaysian women is 51. Hormonal changes will cause menopausal symptoms, says Dr Sivah. "Signs include fatigue,


sleep disturbance, body weight changes and vaginal discomfort. But the most common of all is changes in attitude." Some may even develop anxiety or depression, which can be minimised by maintaining a healthy lifestyle that keeps your hormone levels balanced.

As bones tend to weaken with age, you may also be at a higher risk for osteoporosis. "Women who are 40 or older are advised to go for a dxa scan, where your bone mineral density (BMD) will be measured to determine your bone health," says Dr Sivah. A gradual loss of bone density starts from around 35 years old, but in addition to that, women tend to lose bone rapidly in the first few years after menopause due to the discontinuation of their monthly period. Although losing bone density is part of the ageing process, for some women it can lead to osteoporosis and bone fractures.

Dr Sivah also urges women in this age group to go for an electrocardiogram (ECG), which assesses the electrical and muscular functions of the heart, as heart diseases are very

common these days. In 2009, the Health Ministry estimated that one in four deaths in government hospitals was attributed to either a heart attack or stroke. Common causes of heart disease are blocked arteries, obesity, hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol. It helps to eat a balanced diet, control your alcohol consumption and stop smoking.

AGES 60 AND ABOVE

Regular health screenings help in keeping you healthy and robust at your age. The standard tests still apply: you should screen your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels, in addition to doing a mammogram, dxa scan and ECG. "Your doctor will also perform other tests based on your symptoms. But one of the frequent illnesses that we've seen in women who are 60 and above is jaundice," says Dr Sivah. Jaundice causes the skin, sclera (whites of the eyes) and mucous membranes to turn yellow. "We'll look for the cause of the disease and treat it from there." 

Where to go for a health screening

Columbia Asia Hospital Cheras

Address: Jalan Suakasih, Tun Hussein Onn, 43200 Cheras, Selangor
Website: www.columbiaasia.com/cheras
Telephone: 03-9086 9999

Gleneagles Kuala Lumpur

Address: 282-286 Jalan Ampang, 50450 Kuala Lumpur
Website: gleneagleskl.com.my
Email: inquiry@gleneagleskl.com.my
Telephone: 03-4141 3000

Prince Court Medical Centre

Address: 39, Jalan Kia Peng, 50450 Kuala Lumpur
Website: www.princecourt.com
Email: corporate.affairs@princecourt.com
Telephone: 03-2160 0000 (24 hours)

Pantai Hospital Kuala Lumpur

Address: 8, Jalan Bukit Pantai, 59100 Kuala Lumpur
Website: www.pantai.com.my
Telephone: 03-2296 0888

Subang Jaya Medical Centre

Address: 1, Jalan SS12/1A, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor
Website: sjmc.ramsaysimedarby.asia
Telephone: 03-5639 1212

Sunway Medical Centre

Address: 5, Jalan Lagoon Selatan, Bandar Sunway, 47500 Selangor
Website: www.sunwaymedical.com
Email: smc@sunway.com.my
Telephone: 03-7491 9191 / 03-5566 9191

