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NINE LIFE-SAVING PREVENTIVE SCREENING TESTS FOR THE OVER FIFTIES

Physical health screening is an important part of maintaining overall wellness at any age, but even more so as we get older. If you are 50 years or older, these are the preventive screening tests that should be part of your healthcare screening routine.

Bear in mind that when you go for your yearly physical, your doctor may recommend other tests based on your personal health profile. Here are nine important health checks when you are 50 years or older.

1. Preventative screening assessments

Let's start with the basics. A simple screening assessment is what you need to understand your health. It is quick, easy and convenient. During a screening assessment, your blood pressure, glucose, cholesterol and your body mass index (BMI, which is a weight assessment) are determined, all in one sitting.

Going for a quick and simple preventative screening assessment can be the greatest investment you make in your and your family's future health. Every year, these assessments are fully covered by the Fund from the existing [Screening and Prevention Benefit](#).

You can get these screening assessments done at a Discovery store, Clicks or Dis-Chem pharmacy, or at healthcare professional and selected pharmacies on the Discovery Wellness Network.

2. Colorectal cancer screening

[The Cancer Association of South Africa](#) identifies colorectal or colon cancer among the top three cancers for both men and women in South Africa. What's more concerning is that, according to the Mayo Clinic, many people with colorectal cancer experience no symptoms in its early stages. This makes testing for such cancer vital.

Screening can be done in one of two ways.

Faecal occult blood test: This is a simple, non-invasive bowel cancer stool screening test that tests for traces of blood in the faeces. The Fund provides cover for one of these tests, every two years, for all beneficiaries who are 45 to 75 years old and pays up to a maximum of the Fund Rate.

If you are identified to be at risk, you will have access to additional colonoscopy screening.

A colonoscopy: This screening procedure lasts between 30 to 60 minutes. It allows your doctor to look at the inner lining of your large intestine (rectum and colon). The doctor will insert a thin, flexible tube called a colonoscope. This method of testing also helps to find polyps, which may become cancerous, and can detect cancerous tumours in their early stages, before they spread. This type of screening is covered by the Fund when performed in a doctor's rooms and paid up to the Fund Rate. If the scope forms part of your authorised in-hospital care, it will also be paid up to the Fund Rate.

3. Skin and mole checks

Skin cancer is more common in individuals over the age of 50, particularly those who have spent a lot of time in the sun or have a family history of skin cancer. Regular skin cancer screenings enable you to detect any signs of skin cancer early on and allow for early treatment.

So why are older adults more susceptible to this disease?

As we age, we undergo many physical changes. Our skin is no different. Certain changes significantly reduce our defence against skin disease and increase our risk for skin cancer (melanoma). This includes changes like thinner skin, poorer healing capabilities, damage from external factors like smoking and pollution, and a weaker immune system.

During a skin cancer screening, your healthcare provider or dermatologist will closely examine the freckles and moles all over your body for abnormalities, including your scalp and between your fingers and toes. Remember to go to one of the Fund's network GPs or Specialists to ensure that the Fund will pay for these services in full.

4. Joint Care assessment

It is not uncommon to begin experiencing subtle aches and pains around once you are 50 years old. Years of wear and tear on the body all add up. Your doctor can assess your aching joints and will help guide you with supplementation and arthritis care solutions that are suited to your level of activity and health.

During a joint care assessment, patients are tested for osteoarthritis (often called "wear and tear arthritis) of high-traffic joints. Patients are also tested for rheumatoid arthritis (RA), an inflammatory condition where the immune system attacks the tissue lining your joints. Severe RA, if left unchecked, can cause complications like narrowed or blocked heart arteries, scarring of the lungs and blood cancers that can shorten a person's life expectancy. Remember to go to one of the Fund's network GPs or Specialists for an assessment to ensure that the Fund will pay for these services in full.

5. Comprehensive eye examination

A comprehensive eye examination can help an ophthalmologist detect signs of certain cancers. The most common forms of cancer that eye doctors can detect during routine eye exams are skin cancers, such as melanoma, squamous cell and basal cell. They will also be able to detect early signs of lymphoma and leukaemia, which are known to affect the internal tissues of the eyes.

Fatigue, poor diet, and complex health issues like diabetes can affect your vision as you age. It is important to see your eye doctor regularly, and even more so if you are diabetic or have a family history of eye disease. This is so that if a condition like age-related macular degeneration (AMD) occurs, you have the chance of catching it in its early stages before vision loss occurs.

Other age-related eye problems that your eye doctor will test for include presbyopia (long sightedness), glaucoma (an eye condition that damages the optic nerve), dry eyes, age related macular degeneration (degenerative disease that affects the macular and retina), cataracts and temporal arteritis (inflammation of the blood vessels of the temples that can lead to blindness).

You have access to one eye test and one tonometry test per year, paid from your Medical Savings Account. These tests must be performed by a registered optometrist.

Male specific screening

6. Prostate Cancer

Prostate cancer is a malignant tumour that begins in the prostate gland. Certain prostate cancers have a tendency of growing extremely slowly and may not cause symptoms or problems for years, which is why screening tests are important. If it is caught in its early stages, while still confined to the prostate gland, this type of cancer can be cured. Metastatic prostate cancer can be successfully treated, allowing patients to live a reasonably healthy life for several years after their diagnosis.

The Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA) recommends that men over 50 years, or those who are 40 years and older with a family history of prostate cancer, should go for routine prostate cancer screening.

The two most common ways of detecting prostate cancer are:

- A prostate specific antigen (PSA) blood test.
- A digital rectal examination (DRE) and subsequent prostate biopsy.

The Fund pays for these tests from the Pathology benefit.



Female specific screening

The positive side to women's cancer is that there is a good chance of recovery if you catch it early. By being aware of changes in your body and by going for regular screenings, you can prevent cancer from sneaking up and have the chance to safeguard your health.

In addition to the routine pelvic examination that is performed by a gynaecologist, women should undergo the following screening:

7. Breast cancer screening

To find out if you have a higher-than-average risk of developing breast cancer, use the [Engen Medical Benefit Fund MyBreastCancerRisk calculator](#).

According to the National Cancer Registry, one in 26 women are at risk of developing breast cancer in South Africa. The concern is that most women present with late-stage cancers, making for a difficult prognosis. Mammograms are used to detect breast cancer. During a mammogram, the patient's breasts are compressed between two firm surfaces to spread out the breast tissue. An X-ray then captures images that are displayed on a computer screen and examined for signs of cancer.

You are covered for one mammogram every two years, which is paid for from your Screening and Prevention Benefit. It is important to note that if you are at high risk, you qualify for a yearly mammogram and should discuss your screening regimen with your healthcare professional. High-risk members who qualify for an MRI will also have access to this type of screening test.

8. Cervical cancer screening

The [HPV Information Centre](#) has ranked cervical cancer as the second most frequent cancer among women in South Africa.

A Pap smear is an important part of every woman's screening assessments and can detect precancerous cells and cervical cancer. A Pap smear is used to detect abnormal tissue before it develops into cancer. This is a screening test that is usually performed by a gynaecologist using a speculum and a special swab.

You have cover for a Pap smear every three years from the Screening and Prevention Benefit. However, if you are at high risk of getting cervical cancer, it is important to speak to your healthcare professional to advise on the appropriate screening test and how often you should have the screening done.

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is the underlying cause of most cases of cancer of the cervix. This is why tests for human papillomavirus (HPV) should be done every five years in addition to Pap smears.

9. Ovarian cancer screening

If you're over the age of 55, or have a family history of ovarian cancer, a transvaginal ultrasound and a CA-125 blood test could help to detect this condition early. Chat to your gynae about your personal risk and how and when you should be screening for this cancer.

As we age, our bodies undergo many changes. While we have no control over such changes, we can lower our risk of developing certain health problems related to them. By keeping up with your regular screening assessments, you will have a far greater chance of staying healthy, or catching any potential problems early. This can extend the years you will spend in good health as well as your lifespan.



YOUR MENTAL HEALTH IS IMPORTANT

Mental health conditions are common. They affect more than one billion people globally. We want you to know that screening for mental health conditions can help with the early diagnosis of a mental health condition and getting the right treatment.

Mental health is an important part of our wellbeing. In fact, we should think of it as just as important as physical health to our overall wellbeing. According to the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), if your mental health is good, you will be able to realise your own abilities and cope with the normal stresses of life. You should also be able to work productively and contribute to your community.

However, poor mental health and mental health illnesses are very prevalent, and these have been getting more attention since the start of the COVID 19 pandemic.

Rapid social change, stressful working conditions, social isolation, unhealthy lifestyles, poor physical health and illnesses, unemployment, housing problems and poverty or debt are among the factors that can make us vulnerable to mental health problems, says the World Health Organization (WHO).

"Of course, many people experienced one or a combination of these during the pandemic," says Dr Noluthando Nematswerani, Head of the Centre for Clinical Excellence at Discovery Health. "The pandemic has impacted those who were already living with mental health conditions before COVID 19 as well as many more people who are now experiencing issues due to the challenges created by COVID 19."



Know the signs of mental health conditions

Dr Nematswerani points out: “If you have a mental health condition, you are not alone. The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) reports that before COVID-19, one in three South Africans would suffer from a mental illness at some point in their lifetime.”

While there is no single cause for mental illness, there are several factors that can contribute to its development. These might include your genes and family history, stress or a history of abuse, or biological factors such as chemical imbalances in the brain. Mental illness could also be caused by a traumatic brain injury, use of alcohol or recreational drugs, or having a serious medical condition like cancer.

“If you, or someone you know, experience anxiety, mood swings, changes in behaviour, eating disorders, or other symptoms that can’t be explained, you need to speak to a healthcare professional,” says Dr Nematswerani.

Other warning signs of mental illness include:

- Feeling persistently sad, down, or low.
- Dramatic changes in sleep patterns and appetite.
- Withdrawal from social interactions or from activities that you previously enjoyed.
- Decline in personal care.
- Rapid or dramatic shifts in emotions.
- Disconnecting from yourself or your surroundings.
- Problems functioning at school, work or in social contexts.
- Suicidal thoughts.

Common mental health disorders

There are many types of mental illnesses. These include:

- Anxiety disorders.
- Depression and bipolar mood disorder.
- Eating disorders.
- Personality disorders.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Psychotic disorders, such as schizophrenia.

Screening for mental health

“Screening for mental health is very important. This will help your healthcare provider to detect a potential mental illness early on, start you on the right treatment and recommend psychotherapy, if necessary,” says Dr Nematswerani.

During a mental health screening, your GP, psychologist or psychiatrist will consider several factors.

- **Mental evaluation:** Your healthcare provider will ask questions about your feelings, moods, thoughts, behaviour patterns and any other symptoms you have been experiencing.
- **Personal and family history:** Your healthcare provider will want to know about your mental and physical health history and ask about your family history too. They will also ask whether you have been treated for mental illness in the past. Your healthcare provider will ask questions to try to determine if there’s a specific cause for your mental illness. You will need to tell your doctor if you’re using any prescription drugs and of any excessive alcohol consumption or substance abuse.
- **Physical examination:** Your doctor might want to do blood tests to see whether a physical condition (such as thyroid disease) is causing mental health symptoms.
- **Cognitive evaluation:** Your healthcare provider might want to assess your attention and focus, ability to recall information, memory and more.

“Screening early on, and getting the right diagnosis and treatment for a mental illness, will help you to maintain a good quality of life. It can also reduce your risk of hurting yourself or others, prevent other physical health problems that can be caused by a mental disorder and help you to cope better with stressful situations and live productively,” says Dr Nematswerani.

How to take care of your mental health

“There are several things you can do to take care of your mental health.

While these won’t prevent a mental illness, they can help lessen the effects and reduce the amount of mental stress you experience,” adds Dr Nematswerani.

- **Getting enough good quality sleep** is important to keep the brain and body in good health.
- **Regular exercise** gives us a greater sense of wellbeing, lowers rates of depression and anxiety, and improves sleep.
- **Eating a healthy, balanced diet** every day is essential to the health of our bodies and brains as they function best when fuelled with healthy foods.
- **Talking about your feelings** can help to improve your mental health and to cope better with difficult situations.
- **Taking a break** from work or home stressors or getting a change of scenery can help to reduce your stress levels. Short breaks are also helpful if you can’t take a longer holiday.
- **Avoiding drinking alcohol** to change your mood or to deal with fear or loneliness. Drinking alcohol can aggravate the symptoms of a mental illness, making you feel worse than before when the effects wear off.
- **Ask for help** from friends and relatives if you are overwhelmed and can’t cope with day to day activities. They may be able to help with practical things or lend a listening ear.

Engen Medical Benefit Fund mental health resources

- With the help of your Premier Plus GP, actively manage major depression with the **Mental Health Care Programme**. This programme gives you and your Premier Plus GP access to tools and benefits to monitor and manage your condition, making sure you get high quality coordinated care.
- You can use the Fund’s **Find a healthcare provider** tool on our website to find a network psychologist if you need psychotherapy.

Get help with managing your mental illness

There are several organisations that provide support for mental health illnesses.

- The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) | www.sadag.org | 0800 567 567.
- PsychMatters Centre | www.psychmatters.co.za | You can call 011 450 3576 or email info@psychmatters.co.za for psychotherapy, parental guidance, group, or family therapy. They also offer the Living Legend Teen Empowerment workshop to empower your teenager with life skills.
- Lifeline | www.lifeline.co.za | 0861 322 322



RECOVERING AT HOME AFTER OUTPATIENT SPINE SURGERY

Back pain is one of the most common medical conditions experienced by members. Appropriate out of hospital conservative management of back pain has proven to deliver good outcomes and could prevent the need for surgery. However, some conditions may still need surgery to correct the spinal issues that cause neck and back pain. Your surgical team will advise you on the best course of treatment.

Once you are home from your outpatient spine surgery, you must focus on the important aspects of your recovery. Recovery after surgery is never easy, but putting in the extra effort can make your recovery smoother and get you back to your normal activities sooner. We've put together some tips to help you heal well after surgery.

Pain management

Make sure you take your prescribed pain medicines as directed by your doctor. Do not take more pain medicine than instructed. If your pain is not controlled well enough by your prescribed medicine, speak to your surgeon to adjust your medicine. Remember to request refills on time so you are not left without medicine to relieve your pain.

Besides medicine, other pain relief treatments include gentle exercise, getting a massage, short rest periods and frequent re-positioning. You can also try moist heat but remember not to put it directly on an unhealed incision.

Your surgeon might also prescribe a back brace for your recovery. The brace is designed to support your neck or back and limit movement of the spinal levels fused during surgery. Make sure you wear it as instructed by your surgeon.

Healthy eating

Maintaining a healthy diet is always important, and it is even more important after intense medical treatment like surgery. Eating well is essential for successful recovery as your body needs nutrients to help it get strong again. It will also help keep your weight under control after your recovery is over.

Maintain low-fat, balanced diet, rich in fresh fruit and vegetables. Because you will be less active during your recovery, avoid heavy, high calorie and fatty foods

Light exercise

Daily exercise is important for recovery. It will help you build strength and maintain muscle tone. Although you cannot engage in strenuous activity, try to take short walks as often as you can. Gradually increase your distance each day. Talk to your surgeon about whether you can walk up or down stairs.

Avoid activities that require bending, twisting, heavy lifting, or pushing and pulling objects. Do not stand or sit for too long. If your surgery involved a spinal fusion, avoid lifting objects above your head until the fusion is fully healed.

Follow your doctor's orders

Keep in mind that the best advice is to closely follow the surgeon's orders for a safe and speedy recovery. Ask your doctor for advice on how to sit comfortably and lie in bed after your surgery. They should also give you instructions on when and how to bathe.

Notify your surgeon immediately if you have any side effects. Keep a lookout for side effects like fever or chills, night sweats, persistent drainage from your incision, opening of your incision, new onset or worsening pain or weakness, chest pain or shortness of breath, calf pain, or sudden loss of bowel or bladder function.



10 WAYS TO EAT BETTER EVERY DAY

Finding it difficult to keep up a healthy diet? Try these 10 easy-to-remember tips to help make healthy eating consistently achievable and fun!

1. Mix it up

Experts on healthy eating say one of the best ways to reach nutritional balance is to enjoy a variety of foods. Each basic food group – dairy, grains, fats, protein, vegetables, and fruit – gives you different nutrients that are essential for the normal and healthy functioning of our bodies.

2. Bite down on breakfast

No, coffee alone doesn't count as breakfast! Kickstarting your day with a healthy breakfast (like eggs, mushrooms and tomatoes, or oats with fresh fruit and dairy) gives you the energy to get going. Research shows that eating breakfast every morning can help you control your weight as it can keep blood sugar levels stable and stop you from feeling cravings.

3. Chew on a rainbow

Veggies and fruit are filled with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and fibre, so eating your five portions of fruit and vegetables a day helps make sure you meet your nutritional needs. Try choosing ones from each of the five vegetable subgroups:

- Dark leafy greens (like spinach, turnip greens, kale, beetroot greens, green herbs, and romaine lettuce)
- Orange vegetables (carrots, sweet potatoes, butternut, pumpkin)
- Legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas, and split peas)
- Starchy vegetables (mealies, potatoes)
- Other (tomatoes, cabbage, celery, cucumber, lettuce, onions, peppers)

4. Portion caution

Stick to recommended serving sizes. Using smaller plates, bowls and glasses can help keep your portions under control. Remember to drink water and eat slowly so you don't go back for seconds before you realise you're actually full.

5. Move more

Enough, regular exercise can help you maintain a healthy weight. Physical activity is also key to staying healthy because it lowers blood pressure and helps to relieve stress and anxiety. Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate to high intensity exercise most days of the week.

6. Pack snacks

Healthy snacks can keep your energy levels up between meals and prevent eating too much of the wrong kind of food. Try a handful of unsalted nuts, a piece of fresh fruit with plain yoghurt, or a glass of milk.

7. Be a label junkie

Knowing which types of fats should be avoided and how much salt or sugar per serving is too much, can help you buy and prepare healthier meals. A dietitian can help you read and understand food labels so you can make smarter choices quickly when you shop for groceries.

8. Brush up on food hygiene

To lower the risk of getting sick from your food, always remember to wash your hands properly before preparing and eating food. Make sure your food is properly cooked and refrigerate foods at a suitable temperature to slow bacteria growth.

9. Home bakes

Cooking and eating at home means you know exactly what goes into your food. This way, you can avoid eating too much sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats without knowing about it. Plus, research shows that family meals promote healthier eating. So set the table, look away from your screens, and tune into each other.

10. Pack your lunch

Packing your own workday lunches means fewer (unhealthy) impulse buys, and it saves you money.

If you're unsure how to eat right, ask an expert – that's what they're there for! A dietitian can help you bring all these tips together and create a personalised and sustainable eating plan for you and your family.

Start with one simple change today to make healthy eating a part of your life forever.