

Health checks for women

Tests that check your health



About Jean Hailes for Women's Health

Jean Hailes for Women's Health is a national not-for-profit organisation committed to improving women's health across Australia. We write health information for people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and identities. We use the term 'women', but we acknowledge that this term is not inclusive of all people who may use our content.

Acknowledgements

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- Ballarat Community Health
- Ballarat Region Settlement Advocacy Committee
- Centre for Culture, Ethnicity & Health
- IPC Health
- Multicultural Centre for Women's Health

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Illustrations by Alexandra Gomez

My body. My health.

A health education toolkit



My body. My health. is an educational toolkit to help organisations and educators deliver health information to women from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

The toolkit is a series of presentations on important health topics.

Visit jeanhailes.org.au for more information and a list of available presentations in English and other languages.

Today we'll talk about important health checks for women in Australia:

- what they are
- why and when you need to have them
- how you can make an appointment with a doctor.

Note to the facilitator: choose a few questions (examples below) to lead a brief group discussion on how the participants understand 'health' and what their beliefs are about health and illness.

Questions to consider:

- What is illness? Where does it come from? Can anyone get sick?
- Can you do anything to prevent illness, especially a serious one like cancer?
- What does it mean to take care of your health?
- How do you take care of your health?
- How do people take care of their health in your home country?
- Do you go to the doctor or nurse only when you feel sick or have a problem?
- Do you do anything NOT to get sick in the first place?
- Do you know that there are things you can do to prevent illness?



What is a health check?

A health check is when a doctor or nurse examines you at your local clinic or health centre. They might do some tests using special tools or equipment.

Doctors are also called GPs or general practitioners.

Here are good reasons why you should have a health check:

- to check you are healthy and well
- to help you stay healthy and well for a long time
- to find any health problems early and get treatment
- to get information on how to stay well, such as what exercise to do and what foods to eat
- to ask your doctor or nurse any questions about your health.

A health check is a test that your doctor or nurse does to make sure your health is good.



How often do I need to have a health check?

You need to have a health check with your doctor or nurse once a year. You should do this even if you feel healthy. When you have regular health checks, you can find out about health problems sooner, before they get worse.

At a health check, the doctor or nurse will ask you about:

- any illness or treatment that you have or have had. This is called your medical history
- the medical history of your family – your mother, father, brothers and sisters. If other people in your family have certain diseases, these health checks are even more important
- what you eat, how much you exercise, and if you smoke or drink alcohol.

Does everyone get the same health check?

No. You will need different health checks or tests at different times in your life. This is because different things can happen to the body at different ages.

Your doctor or nurse will tell you which tests you need.

If you have regular health checks, you can find if you have health problems early.



What can I talk to my doctor or nurse about when I go for my health check?

In Australia, your doctor or nurse expects you to talk about anything that is worrying you. Your doctor or nurse might not know if you have a health problem if you don't say anything.

For example, you can talk to your doctor or nurse about:

- any pain you feel in your body
- any trouble you have going to the toilet
- how you are feeling; if you have been sad or worried for a long time, etc.

You should also talk to your doctor or nurse about what cancer screening tests you need to have.

You can talk to your doctor or nurse about anything that worries you.



What cancer screening tests are available in Australia?

There are 3 cancer screening tests for women:

1. cervical screening
2. breast screening
3. bowel screening.

These tests help find cancer early.

If you can find out early that you are sick, you have a better chance of getting well.



In Australia, there are tests to help find cancer before you feel sick.

NATIONAL
CERVICAL SCREENING
PROGRAM

A joint Australian, State and Territory Government Program

BreastScreen
AUSTRALIA

A joint Australian, State and Territory Government Program

NATIONAL
BOWELCANCER
SCREENING PROGRAM



Cervical screening test

NATIONAL

CERVICAL SCREENING

PROGRAM

A joint Australian, State and Territory Government Program

What is the cervix?*

The cervix is the entrance to the womb. It connects your vagina to your womb.

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is cancer that grows in the cervix. Any woman can get this cancer. It's one of the easiest types of cancer to prevent. It can also be easy to cure.

What causes cervical cancer?

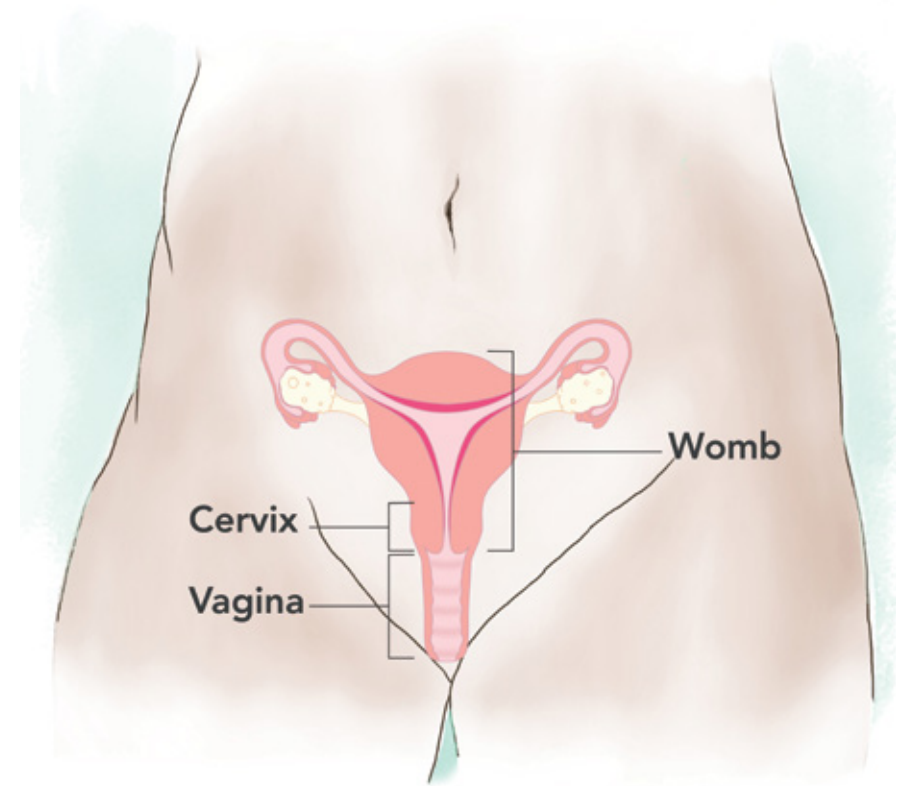
Usually, this cancer is caused by a common virus called HPV. You can get HPV through contact with someone else's private bits (genitals) during sex. Sometimes HPV can cause cancer.

People should get the HPV vaccine before becoming sexually active. The HPV vaccine helps prevent cervical, genital, anal and throat cancers. Boys and girls between 9 and 19 years old can get a free HPV vaccine. Talk to a doctor or nurse for more information.

*Note to the facilitator: refer to the image.

You can get cancer in your cervix.

The cervix connects your vagina to your womb.



What is the cervical screening test?

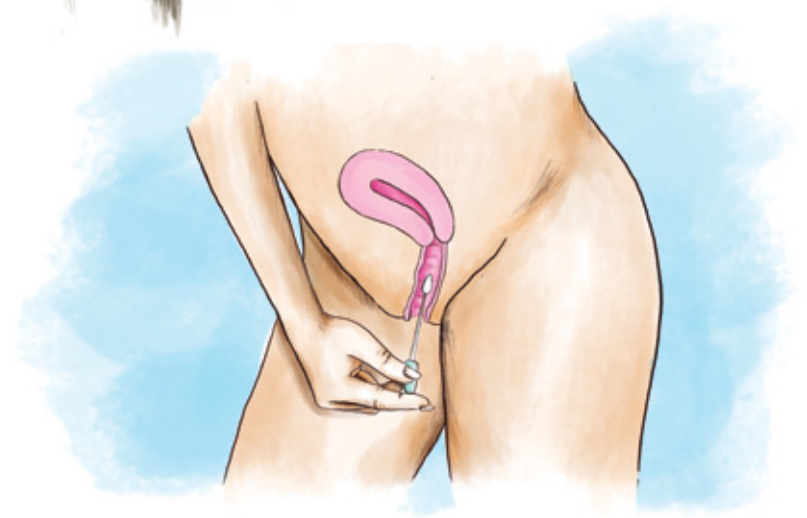
The cervical screening test is quick and easy. It checks if you have HPV, the virus that can cause cancer.

A doctor or nurse will gently take a sample from your cervix. This should not hurt and only takes a few seconds.

If you prefer, you can take a sample from your vagina yourself, in a private space. Ask your doctor or nurse about it.

If you have this test regularly, it's your best protection against getting cervical cancer.

The cervical screening test helps protect you from getting cervical cancer.



When do I have this test?

If you are between 25 and 74 years of age, you need to have the cervical screening test every 5 years. If you don't know when you need your next test, ask your doctor or nurse.

Where do I have this test?*

Here are places where you can have this test:

- a doctor's clinic
- a community health centre
- a women's health centre
- a family planning clinic
- a sexual health clinic.

Having a cervical screening test every 5 years can save your life.

*Note to the facilitator: give examples of the local clinics and centres where women can have this test.



Have a cervical screening test when you turn 25 and then every 5 years.

NATIONAL

CERVICAL SCREENING

PROGRAM

A joint Australian, State and Territory Government Program

What if I think something is wrong?

If something is happening with your body that is not normal for you, like:

- bleeding
- unusual liquid coming out of your vagina
- pain in your lower belly
- pain after having sex,

you need to see a doctor or nurse as soon as you can.

Don't wait until your next cervical screening test.

You need to see your doctor or nurse if you're bleeding or have pain that's not normal.





Breast screening test

BreastScreen
AUSTRALIA

A joint Australian, State and Territory Government Program

What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is cancer that grows in the breast. It is the most common cancer for women in Australia and can develop at any age.

About 1 in 7 women in Australia will develop breast cancer at some time in their life.

Why is it important to find breast cancer early?

If you find breast cancer early, there is a good chance you will get better. The cancer will be smaller and there will be more ways to treat it.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in Australia.

It's one of the easiest cancers to treat if found early.



You need to know your breasts well so you can see if there is a change in either of them.

What do I need to know about my breasts?

It's a good idea to look at your breasts in the mirror and learn:

- what they look like
- their shape, size and colour
- what they feel like.

Most changes in the breast are not breast cancer. But if you do notice a change, you must get it checked by a doctor or nurse as soon as possible.

Get to know your breasts.

If you see or feel any changes,
see a doctor or nurse.



One way to find changes in the breast early is to check your breasts every month.

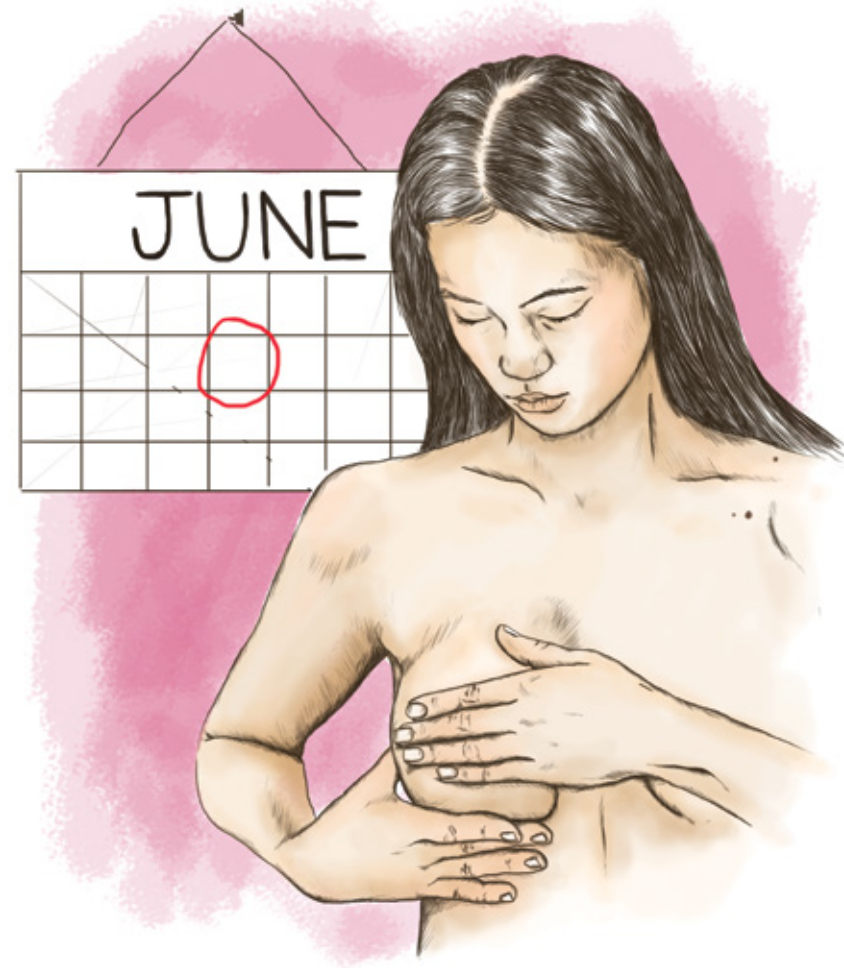
How do I check my breasts?

- Once a month, check the shape, colour and size of your breasts.
- It's best to check your breasts a few days after the end of your period (menstruation). Set a reminder in your phone or on your calendar to check your breasts on the same day every month.
- Feel your breasts using the pads of your fingers, in the shower or lying down.
- Look out for lumps and changes to the skin or nipple, or for any redness, pain or discharge.
- Make sure you feel the entire breast area from your collarbone to your tummy and include your armpits.
- You can ask your doctor or nurse to show you how to check your breast.

There is no right or wrong way to feel your breasts – it is important to find a way that works for you and do it regularly.

Check your breasts
once a month.

It's easy!



Another way to find changes in the breast is by having a breast screen every 2 years.

What is a breast screen?

A breast screen is a photo of the inside of your breast. It shows changes that are too small for you or your doctor or nurse to see or feel.

When should I have a breast screen?

- If you are between 50 and 74 years old, have a breast screen every 2 years.
- If you are between 40 and 49 or over 74 years old, you may choose to have a breast screen.
- If you are under 40, your doctor might ask you to have a breast screen if they think you need one, or if someone else in your family has had breast cancer.
- Breast screens can only be done from 35 years of age.

How do I book a breast screen appointment?

BreastScreen Australia provides breast screens for free if you have no breast symptoms. To book a breast screen appointment, call BreastScreen Australia on 13 20 50. This number will connect you to a BreastScreen service in your area.

You can also book an appointment online at www.breastscreen.org.au

Need an interpreter?

If you need an interpreter, call the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) on 131 450 and ask to be connected to BreastScreen in your state/territory.

Have a free breast screen every 2 years from the age of 50.



Why is it so important to have a breast screen?

Regular breast screens find most breast cancers early and help prevent deaths.

If breast cancer is found early, it is more likely to be small and successfully treated.

This helps you to get healthy again to enjoy your life and family.

If you find any changes in your breasts, see a doctor or nurse as soon as you can.

If you find breast cancer early,
you have a better chance of
getting healthy again.





Bowel cancer screening test

**NATIONAL
BOWELCANCER**

SCREENING PROGRAM

What is the bowel?

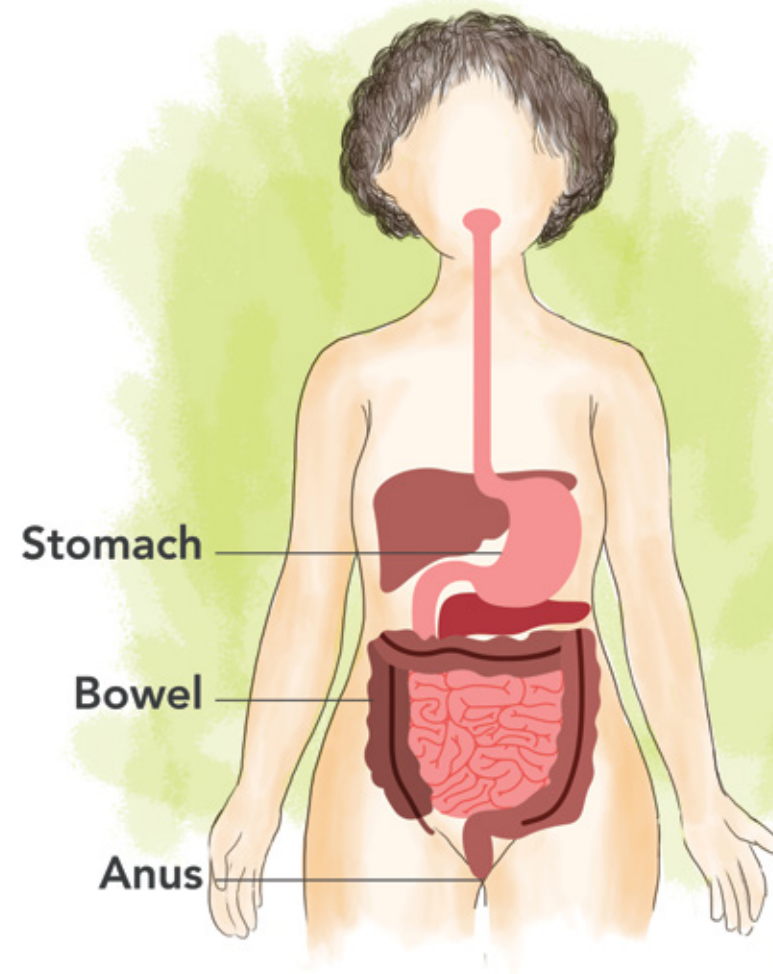
The bowel is part of the digestive system*. The bowel is the tube that takes food from your stomach to your anus (where you poo from).

What is bowel cancer?

Bowel cancer is cancer that grows in the bowel. It is a common cancer in Australia and is easier to treat and cure if found early. A screening test is the best way to find bowel cancer early.

*Note to the facilitator: use the image if you want to briefly explain the digestive system.

You can get cancer
in your bowel.



What is the bowel cancer screening test?

The bowel cancer screening test checks for blood in your poo, which can be an early sign of bowel cancer.

When do I need to do the bowel screening test?

You need to do the test from the age of 50. And you need to do it every 2 years until you're 74.

Do a bowel cancer screening test when you turn 50 and every 2 years after that.



The advertisement features the Australian Government crest and the text "Australian Government" on the left. To the right, it says "NATIONAL BOWELCANCER SCREENING PROGRAM". The central text reads "Free Home Test Kit". Below this, it says "PATHOLOGY SERVICES" and "SONIC HEALTHCARE". On the right side, there is a graphic of a lifebuoy with a roll of paper inside it, and the text "4 easy steps that could help save your life." Below the lifebuoy is a QR code with the text "scan for more info" and the website "health.gov.au/nbcsp".

How do I get the test?

This free test is sent to your home address every 2 years once you turn 50.

If you don't get the test, call the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program on 1800 627 701 or talk to your doctor or nurse.

How will I know what to do?

The test is easy to do. When the test arrives at your home, it comes with instructions that show you exactly what to do.

The test for bowel cancer
is free and easy to do.

It's sent to your home from
the age of 50.



Bowel cancer usually has no signs in the early stages.

That's why it's important to see your doctor or nurse straight away if you notice any of these changes:

- there is blood in your poo
- your poo has become different from what it normally is, such as harder, looser or a different shape
- you have stomach pains or you can feel a lump
- you're tired a lot and you don't know why
- you're losing weight and you don't know why.

See a doctor or nurse if:

- there is blood in your poo
- your poo has changed
- you have stomach pains
- you're losing weight
- you're tired a lot.



What can I do to keep my bowel healthy?

You can help keep your bowel healthy if you:

- don't smoke
- keep a healthy weight
- eat a diet high in fibre
- avoid alcohol
- drink plenty of water
- exercise regularly
- have screening tests every 2 years after you turn 50 years old.

Keep your bowel healthy.





Sexual health checks

What is a sexual health check?

A sexual health check is a visit to your doctor or nurse to:

- talk about safe sex
- talk about your rights when you're in a relationship with someone
- talk about your right to decide if you do or don't want to get pregnant
- talk about what sort of contraception you can use if you don't want to get pregnant
- get a cervical screening test
- have a test for sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

When do I need to have a sexual health check?

Have a sexual health check if:

- you are starting a new sexual relationship
- you have had unprotected sex. Unprotected, or unsafe sex, is sex without a condom or dental dam (a thin layer of latex)
- the condom broke or fell off during sex
- you think you might have an STI
- your partner has sex with other people
- you have sex with more than one person
- you share needles with other people when using drugs or getting tattoos or piercings.

If you're having sex, it's a good idea to have a sexual health check regularly.

You may feel nervous about having a sexual health check, but doctors and nurses are there to help you.

At different times in your life,
you will need to have a sexual
health check.



What is an STI?

STI stands for sexually transmitted infection. It's an infection that you can get when you have sex.

STIs are common all around the world. There are many different STIs, such as:

- genital herpes
- chlamydia
- gonorrhoea
- syphilis
- hepatitis B and C
- HIV.

How can I get an STI?

You can get an STI if you:

- have unprotected sex with someone
- put your mouth on a penis or vulva
- touch a penis, vulva, vagina or anus together
- touch another person's body fluids.

If STIs are not treated, they can:

- cause irritation and pain
- make it hard for women to have children
- cause health problems that can last a long time.

If you have sex, you can get an infection – this is called an STI.



You can't tell if a person has an STI just by looking at them. Even if a person looks strong and healthy, they can still have an STI and pass it on to another person.

It's possible to have an STI and not know about it.

Sometimes there are signs that you or another person could have an STI.

Some possible signs include:

- sores, blisters, broken skin or irritation on the penis, vulva, anus or mouth
- unusual liquid coming out of the penis, vagina or anus
- the vulva or vagina looks red, hurts, is itchy or smells bad
- lumps and bumps on the penis, vulva, vagina or anus
- pain or bleeding during sex
- pain when you wee.

You can't tell if someone has an STI by looking at them.

People can look healthy but still have an STI.



If you think you have an infection, you need to get tested.

Tests for STIs are simple, free and safe to do.

If the test shows you have an infection, you can start treatment straight away. This will help you to get better sooner and stop you from giving the infection to someone else.

Where do I go for an STI test?*

You can have an STI test done at:

- your local medical clinic
- your local community health centre
- a sexual health clinic
- a family planning clinic.

*Note to the facilitator: indicate where sexual health checks are available locally.

What if I am embarrassed?

If you feel embarrassed about having an STI test, remember that doctors and nurses:

- won't judge you
- do the tests every day and it's their job to look after you
- won't share your information with anyone.

If you are worried about your privacy, you can go to a different clinic and not your usual doctor or nurse.

Chlamydia

Women under 30 years of age who are having sex need to get their wee tested for chlamydia every year.

Chlamydia can make it hard for you to get pregnant. Most women who have chlamydia have no signs, so they don't know they have it.

Tests for STIs are simple,
free and safe to do.



Ways to stop getting an STI:

- Practise safer sex – don't allow your partner's semen, blood, or vaginal fluids into your body. Use a condom, female condom or dental dam every time you have sex, even if you have your period (menstruation).
- If you have sex, have regular sexual health checks.
- Before you have sex with someone new, have a sexual health check and ask them to have one too.
- Don't share needles, tattoo equipment, razors, or other things that might have blood from someone else.

Things you can do to stop STIs:

- practise safer sex
- have regular sexual health checks
- ask your partner to have a sexual health check
- don't share things that may have blood on them, like needles.





Making an appointment and seeing your doctor

If you or your family need to see a doctor, make an appointment right away because it may take a few days before the doctor can see you. If you need an interpreter, call the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) on 131 450.

If it's an emergency, call 000.

How do I make an appointment?

You can make an appointment with your doctor by:

- calling the health centre
- visiting the health centre in person
- booking on the internet if the health centre has a website.

When you make an appointment, you can:

- ask for a female doctor
- ask for an interpreter at your appointment – you can ask for a phone interpreter, a female interpreter, or an interpreter who is in another state
- ask for an immediate appointment if you need urgent attention for a serious medical issue
- ask how much you need to pay for the appointment
- choose a short or long appointment:
 - ask for a short appointment if you need a new prescription
 - ask for a long appointment if you have a few things to talk about.

You will need to make a separate appointment for each family member who needs to see a doctor.

When you want to see a doctor, make an appointment.



What if I don't feel comfortable going to a doctor?

There are things you can do to make yourself more comfortable and confident when you see a doctor.

You can:

- ask to see a female doctor or nurse
- use an interpreter – ask the clinic to arrange one. Interpreters can't talk to other people about what you say in the appointment
- take a family member, friend or support worker with you, but they shouldn't interpret for you
- prepare for your appointment before you go.

If you're not comfortable going to the doctor, you can:

- ask to see a female doctor
- ask for an interpreter
- take someone with you.



How can I prepare for my appointment?

To prepare for your appointment, write down:

- a list of things you want to talk about
- any signs of illness you have; when they started, how long they last, how often they happen
- all the medicines, vitamins and herbal remedies you're taking
- any medicines that you can't take (e.g. aspirin, penicillin)
- any serious illnesses that you or other members of your family have had.

Remember to bring:

- your Medicare card and healthcare/concession card if you have them
- copies or reports from any recent tests if you have them
- your notes
- someone to support you if you need it.

Prepare for
your appointment.



What can I talk to my doctor or nurse about?

- The most important thing when speaking with your doctor or nurse is to always tell the truth.
- Your health, your worries and your situation are important, so speak up. Doctors and nurses will not judge or criticise you.
- Don't think something is normal or not important enough to mention.
- What you talk to them about is private, so don't be afraid to tell them anything.

For the doctor or nurse to help you, they need to know:

- when you were sick in the past
- what medicines you are taking. Some medicines don't work with other medicines, so they could make you sick or sicker
- if something is different to how you normally are
- if you exercise, smoke, drink alcohol or take drugs.

Tell your doctor or nurse about any health problems you have.

If you don't tell them, they can't help you.



Doctors and nurses can talk about lots of important information that can be hard to understand or remember.

To help you understand what the doctor or nurse says, you can:

- take a notebook and write things down
- ask your doctor or nurse to write down important things, especially about medicines
- ask if there is printed information you can take home
- repeat what you need to do before you leave your appointment to make sure you understand and know what to do
- ask the doctor or nurse to explain things again.

What if I don't like the treatment?

If you're not comfortable with the treatment the doctor or nurse gives you, ask if there are other treatments you could try.

Ask your doctor or nurse to explain all the good and not-so-good things about each treatment so you have all the information before you decide.

If you have problems with your treatment, remember:

- Don't change the treatment without talking to your doctor or nurse first, or you could become sicker.
- Tell your doctor or nurse about all the problems you are having with your treatment.
- Work with your doctor or nurse to find a treatment that works best for you.

If you don't understand something, ask the doctor or nurse to explain it again.



Remember

1. There are free and easy tests to keep you healthy.
2. Your doctor or nurse knows which tests you need.
3. You can talk to your doctor or nurse about anything that worries you.
4. If you don't understand, ask.

Note to the facilitator: provide details of local health services.

Local services





For further information contact

Jean Hailes for Women's Health
PO Box 24098
Melbourne VIC 3001

Phone 03 9453 8999

Email education@jeanhailes.org.au

Website jeanhailes.org.au

Disclaimer: This information does not replace medical advice. If a person is worried about their health, they should talk to their doctor or healthcare team.

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