Health CHECKS FOR EVERY DECADE

Taking control of your health means scheduling those essential health tests. From HPV to the big C, we take a look at the simple yet life-saving tests every woman needs in her 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s.
IN YOUR 20s...

**CHLAMYDIA**

**WHY?** “Chlamydia does not give symptoms, but it is a cause of infertility if left untreated,” explains GP Dr Nina Byrnes from Generation Health Medical Centre (Generationhealth.ie). “However, if you have it, and it’s caught early, it’s unlikely to cause any long-term damage.”

**WHEN?** “For sexually active women under the age of 25, chlamydia is one of the first things we check for,” says Dr Byrnes. It’s a straightforward test in which your GP will take a swab from the neck of the womb (similar to having a smear test).

**HOW OFTEN?** If you’ve had unprotected sex or have a new partner, it’s important to get tested. Also ask to be tested if you experience pain or bleeding after sex.

**HPV**

**WHY?** “The HPV virus is one of the causes of cervical cancer and genital warts,” says Dr Byrnes. “Without testing, the only real way to know if you are a virus-carrier is if you actually see the warts. Around 60 per cent of people who are sexually active are among the most at-risk demographic. “You can get HIV from one episode of intercourse,” warns Dr Byrnes.

**WHEN?** Testing for HIV is a simple blood test, which you can get as part of a full STI screen. It’s advisable to get this done in your twenties if you have had unprotected sex, as the earlier you get it, the better you can manage the virus.

**HOW OFTEN?** If you have frequent partners or unprotected sex, you should get tested. And you may need a number of tests, at three and six months intervals, as it can take a while to show up in the blood.

**IN YOUR 30s...**

**PELVIC EXAM**

**WHY?** Cancer is often a silent killer, so it’s useful to have your womb and ovaries examined by a doctor to check for any changes. The good news is that ovarian cancer is treatable if it’s caught early.

**WHEN?** This simple exam can be done at the same time as a smear test. Your doctor will look for any sign of fibroids, ovarian cysts, an enlarged womb and any signs of infection in and around your pelvis.

**HOW OFTEN?** Every three years, in conjunction with your regular smear test.

**SKIN CANCER CHECK**

**WHY?** Cases of malignant melanoma – the most deadly form of skin cancer – are on the rise, and people with fair, Irish skin are among the most at-risk demographic. It is curable in the majority of cases – if it’s caught early enough.

**WHEN?** Dr Adam Friedmann, a consultant dermatologist at The Harley Street Dermatology Clinic says, “Melanoma is one of the most common cancers in young people, so checking from about 20 years old is important. Get to know your moles and be aware if any are new or have changed,” he says. Look for rapidly growing or enlarging moles, moles that change shape and become irregular or asymmetrical, blurring of the borders of a mole, changing colour, particularly darkening, or more variations of colour appearing or ulceration or bleeding.

**HOW OFTEN?** Dr Friedmann advises checking your skin every three months. “A consultant dermatologist can use specialist equipment such as a dermatoscope to further assess your moles. If in doubt, they will remove them and examine the cells under a high-powered microscope.”

**BREAST CANCER**

**WHY?** In your 30s, your chances of getting breast cancer jump from one in 1,760 to one in 229, so regularly checking for changes becomes vital in this decade.

**WHEN?** According to Clare Manning from the National Screening Service (Cancerscreening.ie) changes to look for include: Lumps in your breast, flattened nipples, a rash around the nipple, a change in the size or shape of your breast or constant pain in your breast or armpit.

**HOW OFTEN?** Every month or so, in order to spot changes quickly. If you notice any changes, visit your GP immediately.

**THYROID FUNCTION**

**WHY?** The thyroid gland is like your body’s thermostat, regulating temperature and controlling your metabolism. So when it goes haywire it can cause a whole host of problems including unexplained weight gain, depression, hair loss and infertility.

**WHEN?** Dr Marilyn Glenville, PhD, a specialist in women’s health (Glenvillenutrition.ie), says that while it’s important for all women displaying symptoms to get their thyroid checked, women who are trying to get pregnant should prioritise this test. “An overactive thyroid that is not treated during pregnancy can cause early labour, pre-eclampsia, low birth weight or stillbirth.”

**HOW OFTEN?** Testing for thyroid hormones can be done by your doctor and involves a routine blood test.

**IN YOUR 20s...**

**PAP SMEAR**

**WHY?** Cervical cancer doesn’t give any symptoms until it’s very advanced, so it’s important to get regular smears.

**WHEN?** From the age of 25. If your smear is abnormal, it’s not necessarily cancer. “You would be referred for a colposcopy,” says Dr Byrnes. “Most abnormalities are treatable and don’t become cancer.”

**HOW OFTEN?** After the age of 25, Irish women can get a free cervical smear every three years until the age of 45. After the age of 45, you can get a free smear every five years until the age of 60.

**HOW OFTEN?** If you have warts, your doctor can freeze them off before giving you a full STI screen.

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Your lifestyle could secretly be adding years to you. Here, the experts reveal the habits to tweak in order to turn back the clock.

1 YOUR INSTAGRAM ADDICTION
If your head is constantly at a 45-degree angle looking down at your smartphone, then you could fall victim to a prematurely sagging neckline, otherwise known as ‘tech neck.’ “Typically, lines on your neck become more pronounced at 45,” explains Dr Rosemary Coleman, Consultant Dermatologist at Dublin’s Blackrock clinic (Drrosemarycoleman.com). “But if you are constantly dipping your chin down, the lines across your neck are going to get stronger. It’s possible that those lines could become more pronounced earlier. Anywhere where you have a repetitive action, that’s where you get a line.”

CHANGE IT: While we can’t ditch our phones completely (where would we be without Pinterest?), we can limit the damage. “Hold the phone up in front of you at eye level when possible,” suggests Dr Coleman.

2 RELYING ON SPF IN MAKEUP
While most of us are well-versed on the ageing effects of the sun, we may not be getting the daily protection we think. Your foundation or tinted moisturiser may claim to offer SPF protection, but the way in which we apply it (sparingly) and how often (once a day) means in reality, it’s no match for the real deal. “Most makeup and foundations are SPF15, but you are not going to be putting on enough to get the rating on the bottle,” says Dr Coleman. “And most makeup doesn’t have a UVA star rating; and UVA is the one that penetrates more deeply and causes ageing.”

CHANGE IT: Use a layered approach, suggests Dr Coleman. “Use a moisturiser with an SPF50, use a primer with SPF and a tinted moisturiser with an SPF of 45,” says Dr Coleman. It’s worth noting that those SPF values are not cumulative: according to the American Academy of Dermatology, the average person’s application of an SPF50 is equivalent to SPF19. “With a layered approach, you are not diluting your SPF50 as much,” adds Dr Coleman.

3 HUNCHING OVER YOUR COMPUTER
If you spend most of your working day hunched over your desk, your consistent slouching could be wreaking havoc on your long-term health, leading to a tilted pelvis, rounded shoulders and even a hunchback. Mr Simon Moyes, Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon at The Wellington Hospital (Thewellingtonhospital.com) explains, “Being hunched in a poor position at work will lead to an upper thoracic kyphosis (curved spine) and extended neck, lower cervical and neck and back pain. Also, being seated for long periods of time causes hip contractures and hamstring tightening – all of which aggravates back pain.”

CHANGE IT: Unless you win the Lotto, you probably can’t give up the day job, but you can minimise the damage by being conscious of your posture at work. “It’s important to regularly move around, to exercise regularly outside of work and to try to organise a regular regime of appropriate postural control,” says Moyes.

4 CRANKING UP YOUR IPOD
Hearing loss is common as we age, but you could be fast-tracking your hearing problems if you are guilty of blasting your playlist at top volume through your earphones. Jennifer Sim, Clinical Audiologist at Dublin’s Berkeley Hearing Centre explains, “Listening regularly at a high volume and for a long duration poses a very serious threat to one’s hearing. It can result in a temporary reduction in hearing or tinnitus (ringing sensation in the ears), but in some cases, it can permanently damage hearing.”

CHANGE IT: Sim suggests you should turn down the music so you can still hear a conversation happening two metres away, and apply the 60:60 rule. “Listen to music through headphones at 60 per cent of the maximum volume for no more than 60 minutes a day.” Also, invest in big muff-type headphones over earbud styles, Sim suggests.

“If you spend your working day hunched over your desk you’re affecting your healthy”
6 SLEEPING ON THE SAME SIDE
Sleeping on the same side every night or on your stomach with the same side of your face smashed into the pillow can age your skin over time. “I can predict with 90 per cent certainty what side a client sleeps on,” says Dr Coleman. “Every face is asymmetrical, and the weaker side is usually the one that people sleep on most often. People who are right-handed tend to sleep on their right side first, which increases wrinkles and flattens that side of the face.”

CHANGE IT: Try sleeping on your back, or switch up your sleeping positions. You could also try using a silk or satin pillowcase, which may help maintain your skin’s moisture levels.

7 TURNING UP THE HEAT
Thanks to our unpredictable Irish weather, it’s not unusual to reach for the thermostat – even in July – but cranking up the heat (or aircon) sucks the moisture from the air, which can lead to dry, inflamed skin that has ageing effects over time. “Dry skin won’t cause wrinkles, but the dryness may bring emphasis to wrinkles, so cranking up the heating may cause your skin to become dry and dehydrated making your wrinkles look more exaggerated,” says Dr Adam Friedmann, Consultant Dermatologist at The Harley Street Dermatology Clinic (Theharleystreetdermatologyclinic.co.uk). Also, heating can trigger conditions such as eczema which will often present as red, scaly, thickened patches of skin with increased wrinkling or folds that can often give the appearance of crow’s feet and ageing.

CHANGE IT: “Using a humidifier to add moisture to dry indoor air may help,” says Dr Friedmann. Alternatively, try placing a wet towel over the radiator.

8 EXCESSIVE RUNNING
Regularly pounding the pavement can cause premature skin sagging, and if you are doing it outdoors, you can add sun damage into the mix. Dr Coleman says, “Jogging has a major impact on your skin. Over exercising can cause a condition known as ‘jogger’s face’, where you burn the fat pads off the face. You can end up with a very 2D face,” says Dr Coleman. “You also have to be very vigilant of UV light when jogging outdoors.

CHANGE IT: “Use a good, strong sun block, and reapply it regularly, as wind, sweat and even blowing your nose can rub it off,” says Dr Coleman. Also mix up your high intensity cardio sessions with more moderate exercise, such as walking.

9 LATE-NIGHT NETFLIX MARATHONS
Staying up to binge-watch Orange is The New Black is not only eating into the amount of beauty sleep you get – it also affects the quality of sleep you get. Sleep specialist Dr Nerina Ramlakhan from the Nightingale Hospital (Nightingalehospital.co.uk) explains, “The sleep phase before midnight is incredibly restorative. During this sleep phase, the adrenals and thyroid glands are rebalanced and replenished, so it’s very important for anti-ageing.” She adds, “Research also shows that good, pure sleep (this means sleep that is ‘unmuddied’ by technology) enables the cellular telomeres to maintain their vital elasticity and this is key to staying young.”

CHANGE IT: Shut down technology (iPads, iPhones, etc) close to bedtime, and resist the urge to watch TV in bed.

10 FAST FOOD
Junk food not only adds to weight gain, it can also play havoc with your skin, explains Lovisa Nissan, Nutritionist at the health app Lifesum. “The refined sugar in fast foods may damage your skin’s collagen, which helps the skin to stay firm.”

CHANGE IT: Up your intake of Omega-3, found in oily fish, nuts and avocados. “Omega-3 fatty acids are renowned for having miraculous effects on the skin,” says Lovisa. “They repair damaged skin by reducing redness and irritation and create a strong cell wall which retains moisture and leaves your skin feeling soft and hydrated.”