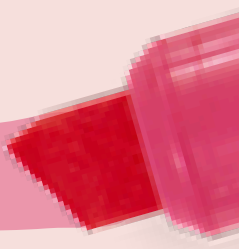


Essential Health Screening Guide for Women

A pink highlighter is shown on the right side of the page, with a pink highlight stroke extending from it across the word 'Screening' in the title.

What to Do in Every Decade of
Your Life

Authors: Courtney Oar B.Pharm, Miranda Chan B.Pharm

Disclaimer

The information contained in this guide is intended for general educational purposes only. It does not constitute medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment, and should not be used as a substitute for professional medical guidance tailored to your individual circumstances.

By accessing and reading this guide, you acknowledge that you are solely responsible for any decisions you make regarding your own health and wellbeing. We encourage you to consult a qualified healthcare professional before making any changes to your health routine, diet, supplementation, or medical care.

The resources used to develop this guide are drawn from Australian best practice, consensus-driven guidelines, and are intended to provide you with accurate, evidence-based information.

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information provided, Pretty Proven does not accept any liability for loss, harm, or damage arising – directly or indirectly – from the use of or reliance on the content within this guide.

Knowledge is power. Use it wisely, and always in partnership with the professionals who know you best.

Contents

- 4-6 **What is Health Screening – And What It Isn't**
- 7-11 **Understanding the Key Screening Tests**
- 12-25 **What Checks Can I Perform Myself at Home?**
- 26-32 **Your Decade-by-Decade Screening Guide**
- 33 **How To Advocate For Yourself**
- 34-39 **Want to Learn More About Health Screening?**
- 40 **Appendix: Your Health Screening Checklist**

What is Health Screening – And What It Isn't ??

Preventive health screening is not about doing every test available. It is about doing the right tests, at the right time, for the right reasons.

Screening is designed for people who feel well. The moment symptoms appear, it is no longer screening – it becomes investigation.

Health screening IS:

- Testing designed for people with no symptoms
- Evidence-based and population-tested
- A starting point for further conversation with your doctor.

Health screening IS NOT:

- A diagnosis
- A reason to panic
- Something you need to do constantly.

Screening programs are only introduced when strong evidence shows they will:

1. **Detect** disease at an earlier, more treatable stage.
2. **Reduce** deaths or serious complications.
3. **Provide** more benefit than harm.

This last point is worth pausing on. More testing is not always better medicine. **Over-screening carries real risks, including:**

False positives a result that looks abnormal but is not, leading to unnecessary worry.

Anxiety the psychological toll of awaiting results or follow-up procedures.

Unnecessary biopsies or procedures that carry their own risks and discomforts.

Overtreatment treating something that may never have caused harm.

Screening programs are carefully designed to strike the right balance between finding what matters and avoiding unnecessary intervention. Understanding this helps you approach your own health decisions with clarity rather than fear.

Screening Diagnosis



These are not the same thing and the distinction matters.

Screening asks:



Could something be present that we should look into further?

Diagnosis answers:



What is actually going on?

A positive screening result does not mean something is wrong. It means the next step is investigation with your doctor, in the right clinical context.



Understanding the Key Screening Tests

Before looking at what is recommended by decade,

it helps to understand what each screening test actually involves and why it exists.

Many screening tests such as eye tests are self-explanatory, so we're just going to focus on some of the women's health-specific testing you may not be as familiar with.

Cervical Screening

Sexual Health Screening (STI screen)

Breast Cancer Screening

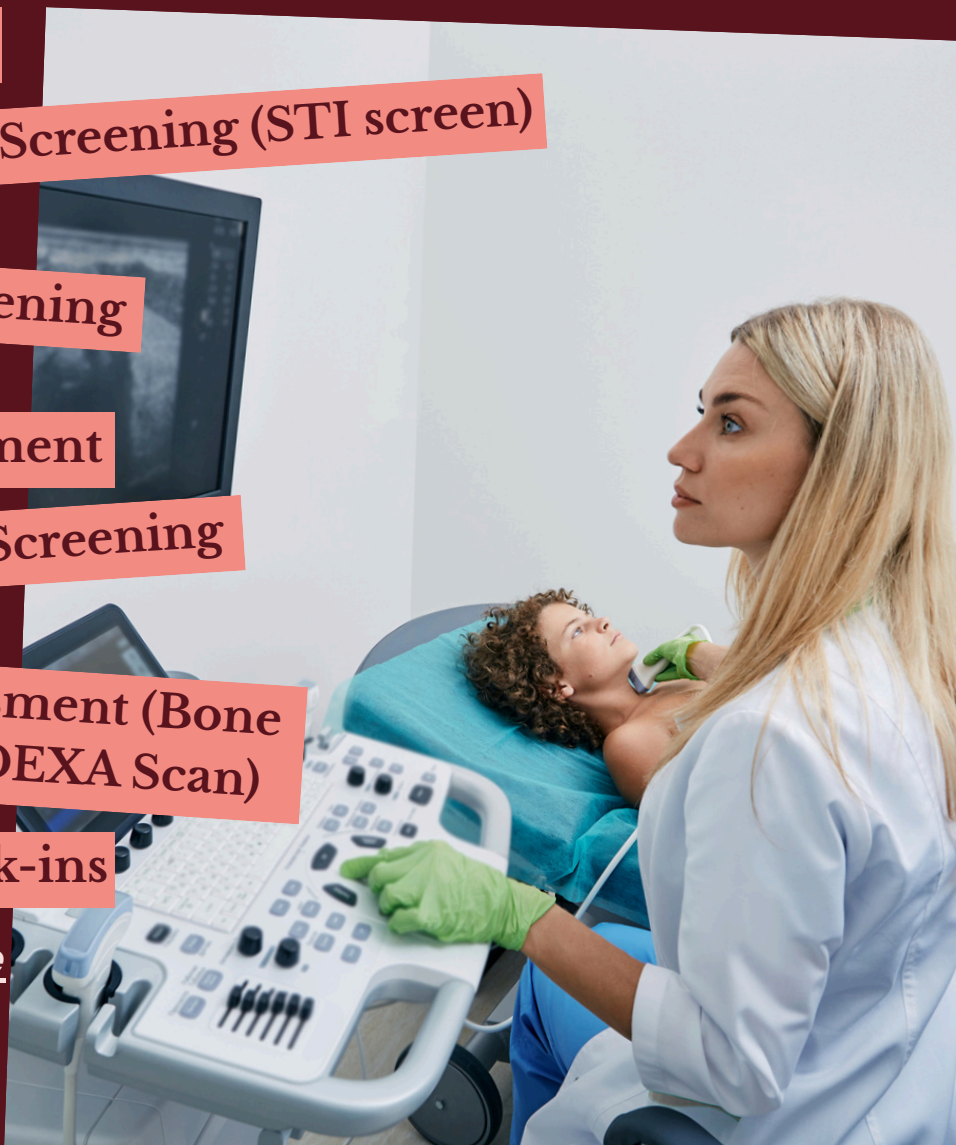
Menopause Assessment

Lung Cancer Screening

Bone Health Assessment (Bone Mineral Density/DEXA Scan)

Mental health check-ins

[Continue to next page](#)



Cervical Screening Cervical screening in Australia is delivered through the National Cervical Screening Program and begins at age 25. It is a primary HPV (human papillomavirus) test performed every five years, which can be done by a clinician or, in certain settings, via self-collection.

The program is based on strong evidence that detecting high-risk HPV strains before they cause cell changes significantly reduces both the incidence of cervical cancer and deaths from it.

This impact has been further strengthened by Australia's national HPV vaccination program which has substantially reduced high-risk HPV infections and pre-cancerous cervical changes in vaccinated groups.

Sexual Health Screening (STI screen) Sexual health screening generally involves urine or vaginal swab testing for infections such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea. Routine screening is recommended for sexually active women aged 15–24, because infection rates are highest in this age group and these infections are frequently asymptomatic – meaning you can have one without knowing.

Beyond age 25, testing becomes risk-based and guided by your sexual history, new partners, or the presence of symptoms. While not part of a formal national age-based program, sexual health screening remains an important part of preventive care.

Understanding the Key Screening Tests

Breast Cancer Screening

Breast cancer screening in Australia is primarily delivered through BreastScreen Australia. Free mammograms are available from age 40, and women aged 50–74 are actively invited to screen every two years.

Mammography is the recommended population screening tool because it has been shown to reduce deaths from breast cancer. Additional imaging, such as ultrasound or MRI, may be appropriate for women with dense breast tissue or an elevated risk profile, but these are not standard tools for the general population.

Menopause Assessment

Menopause and perimenopause are clinical diagnoses, meaning they are primarily identified through symptoms and changes in your menstrual cycle, not through blood tests alone.

For women over 45, routine hormone testing is not recommended unless the diagnosis is unclear or premature ovarian insufficiency (early menopause, typically before age 40) is being considered.

Preventive care during midlife focuses on managing symptoms and supporting long-term health, particularly cardiovascular and bone health.

Lung Cancer Screening

Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in Australia, which makes the launch of the National Lung Cancer Screening Program (NLCSP) a significant step forward for preventive health in this country. The program commenced on 1 July 2025 and is aimed at detecting lung cancer early in high-risk individuals. It is a targeted screening program using low-dose computed tomography (CT) scans and is available to people aged 50 to 70 who are asymptomatic, currently smoke or have quit in the past ten years, or have a smoking history of at least 30 pack-years.

Bone Health Assessment (Bone Mineral Density/DEXA Scan)

Bone health assessment in Australia is risk-based rather than a universal screening program. Testing is recommended for postmenopausal women with one or more risk factors, or anyone who has experienced a fracture from a minor injury. Key risk factors include early menopause, prolonged use of corticosteroid medications, low body weight, vitamin D deficiency, and low dietary calcium intake.

A DEXA scan is a quick, low-radiation imaging test that measures the density of your bones and helps assess your risk of fracture. It is the gold standard tool for diagnosing osteoporosis and osteopenia – conditions where bones become less dense and more vulnerable to breaking. For women aged 70 and over, a DEXA scan is

recommended regardless of risk factors.

Routine DEXA scanning in younger, low-risk women is not currently recommended, however building strong bones through adequate calcium intake, vitamin D, resistance exercise, and a healthy body weight remains important at every age.

Mental health check-ins Not technically a formal screening program, but an important one – especially for women. Mental health struggles are common across all stages of life. In fact, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, anxiety and depressive disorders were the leading contributors to the total disease burden of women in 2024.

Regularly check-in with yourself to identify how often you've been experiencing the following symptoms:

- anxiety
- fatigue
- intense sadness
- irritability
- sleep disturbances.

If these are persisting for more than two weeks, it's time to check-in with your GP.

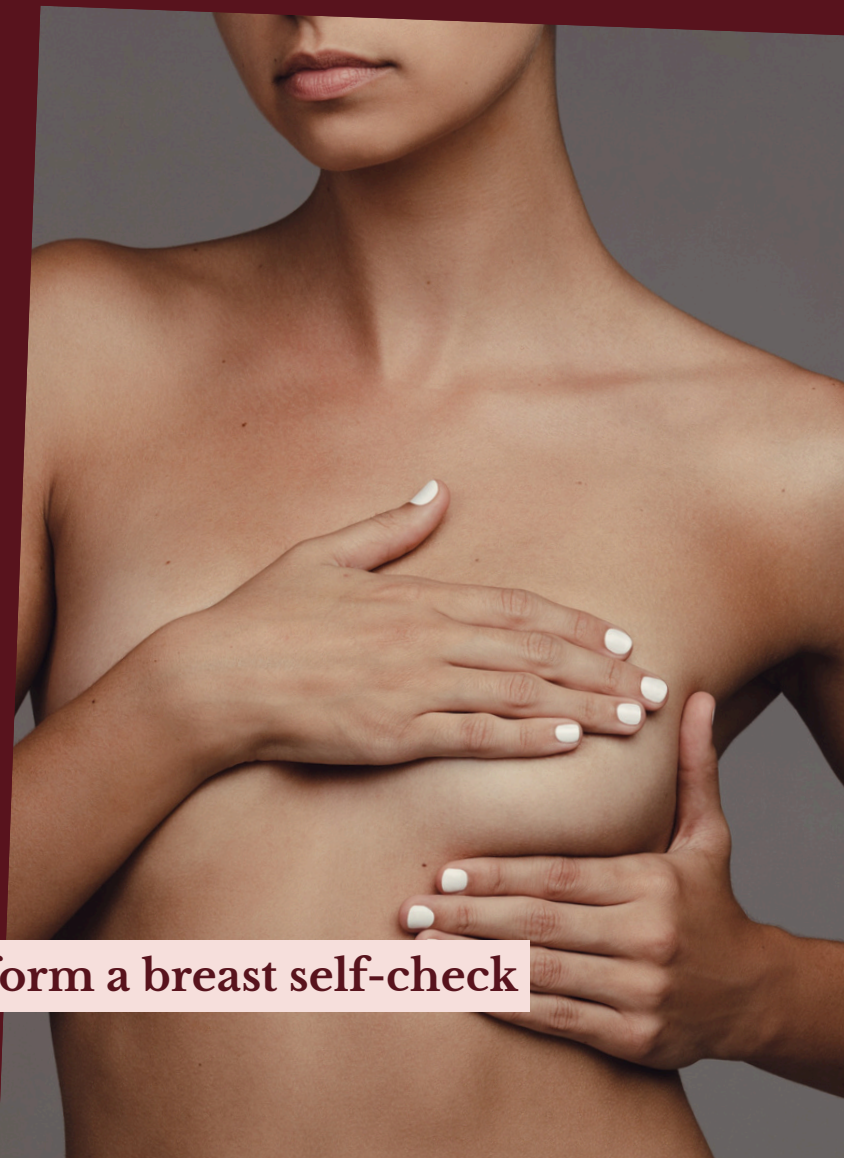
You are not alone.

What Checks Can I Perform Myself at Home?

Breast Self-Check (Breast Awareness)

Breast awareness is recommended for all women regardless of age and is encouraged alongside formal mammogram screening that starts from age 40.

In Australia, even with a fully implemented mammographic screening program, more than half of breast cancers are diagnosed after investigation of a breast change found by the woman or by her doctor, which highlights just how important it is to know your own normal.



See page. 13 - How to perform a breast self-check

How to perform a breast self-check:

1. Remove your top and bra and stand in front of a mirror with your arms by your sides, then above your head if you can, and then on your hips.

2. Notice what is usual for you and watch for anything new, including changes in the shape or size of your breast, irritation or dimpling of the skin, an indent or puckering, a rash or red, crusty or flaky skin on your breast or nipple, or a nipple that suddenly inverts.

3. Starting with one side and one arm raised use flat fingers to feel every part of your breast with light, medium, and firm pressure.

4. Do not forget to check under your breasts, behind your nipple, your armpits, and up to your collarbone.

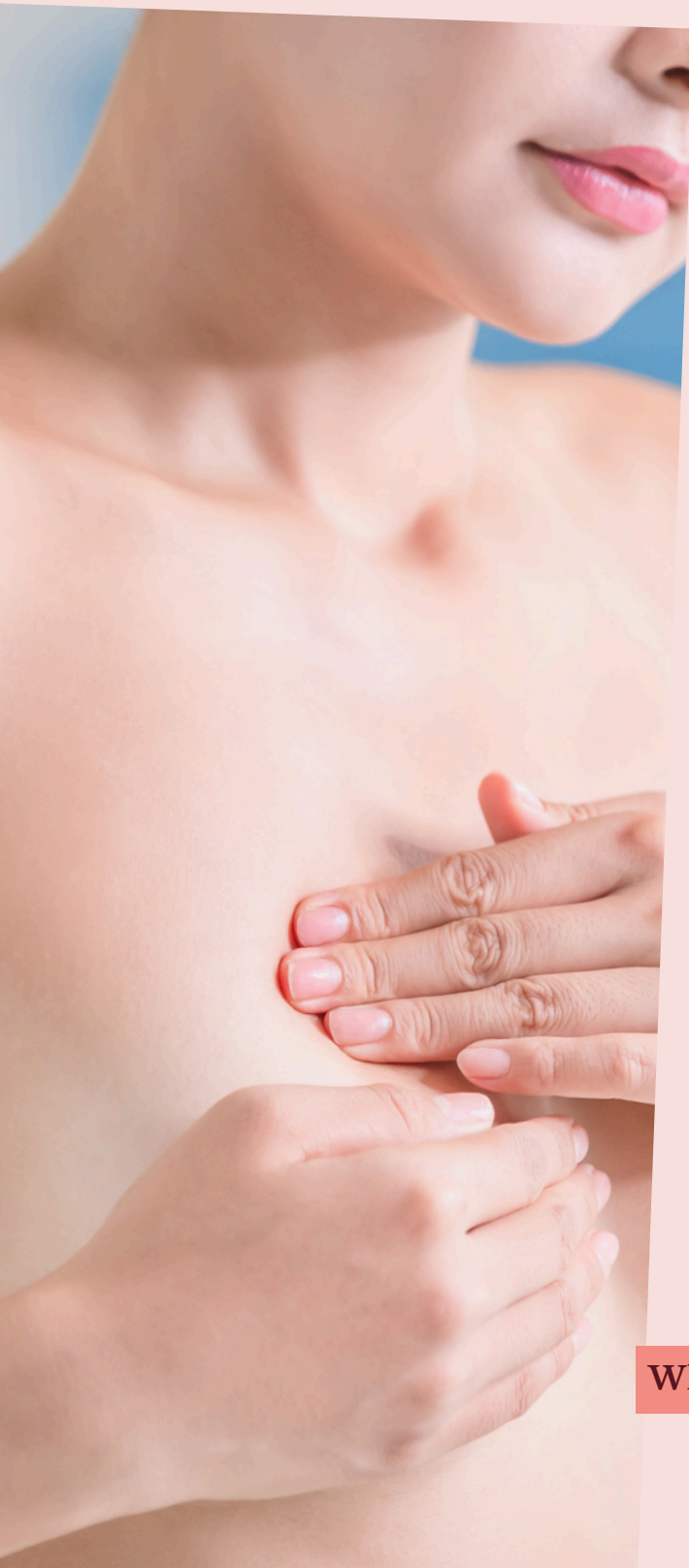
5. Repeat on the other side.



Your breasts can feel different before, during, and after your period, so check at different times of the month.

What Checks Can I Perform Myself at Home

The Breast Cancer Network Australia has a video that provides instructions on how to conduct a breast self-check. You can visit their website at: <https://www.bcna.org.au/>



When to see a healthcare professional:

If you notice anything that looks or feels unusual for you, make an appointment with your healthcare professional without delay. This includes any new lump, skin or nipple change, or unexplained pain.

Do not wait for your next scheduled mammogram if something feels different.

Skin Self Checks

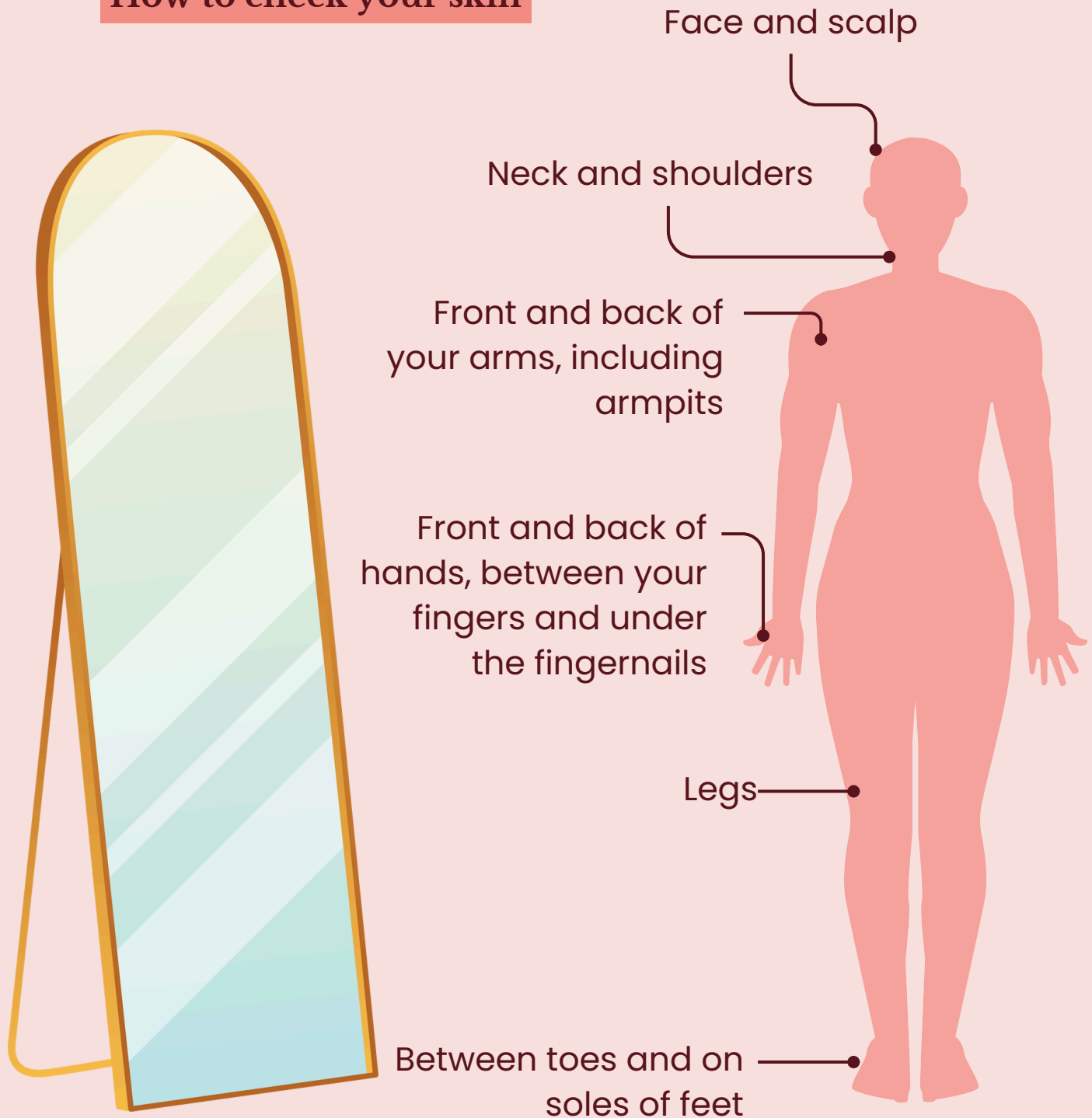
Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world, making regular skin self-examination an important habit for women of all ages and skin types. Cancer Council recommends that you regularly monitor your own skin via self-examination and visit a GP if you notice any changes or new suspicious spots.

Currently, there is no population-wide skin cancer screening program in Australia, which makes self-examination all the more important. Early detection through skin self-examination potentially reduces the risk of advanced melanoma by 63% through early detection of thinner lesions, and most melanomas are found by the person with the melanoma, or their partner.



What Checks Can I Perform Myself at Home

How to check your skin



How to check your skin

- 1. Find a well-lit room and undress completely** so that all areas of your skin are visible.
- 2. Use a full-length mirror and a hand mirror** to examine areas that are difficult to see.
- 3. Work systematically from head to toe,** including your scalp, face, ears, neck, chest, abdomen, back, arms, hands (including between the fingers and under the nails), legs, feet, and the soles of your feet
- 4. Ask a trusted person to help check areas** If you cannot easily see yourself, such as your back and scalp.

When examining spots, moles, and freckles, use the **ABCDE** guide developed by Cancer Council Australia:

A - Asymmetry: one half of the spot does not match the other

B - Border: edges are irregular, blurred, or uneven

C - Colour: uneven colour, or shades of brown, black, red, white, or blue within the same spot

D- Diameter: larger than 6mm, or growing in size

E- Evolving: any change in shape, size, colour, or new symptoms such as itching, bleeding, or crusting

Cancer Council Australia encourages people to become familiar with their skin, including skin not normally exposed to the sun, and consult a doctor if they notice any change in shape, colour, or size of a lesion, or the development of a new lesion.

When to see a healthcare professional:

A GP can perform a skin check and examine any lesions of concern. They are familiar with your history, can talk to you about risk factors and family history, and treat some skin cancers. They might also refer you to a dermatologist if needed. People at higher risk of skin cancer should discuss a plan of how often they should check their skin with their doctor.

A full skin examination, supported with photography and dermoscopy, may be necessary every 6–12 months.

What Checks Can I Perform Myself at Home



Vulval Checks

The vulval self-check is one of the least talked about and most underutilised health checks available to women. Vulvas range in size, shape, and colour, and not many women know what is normal for them. Getting to know what is normal for you makes it easier to pick up changes that might need to be checked by a doctor.

There is no set age to begin. It is more about when you feel comfortable looking at or feeling your vulva and describing any concerns to a trusted person or health professional.

1. Find a private, well-lit space

When you are in the bath or shower is also a great time.

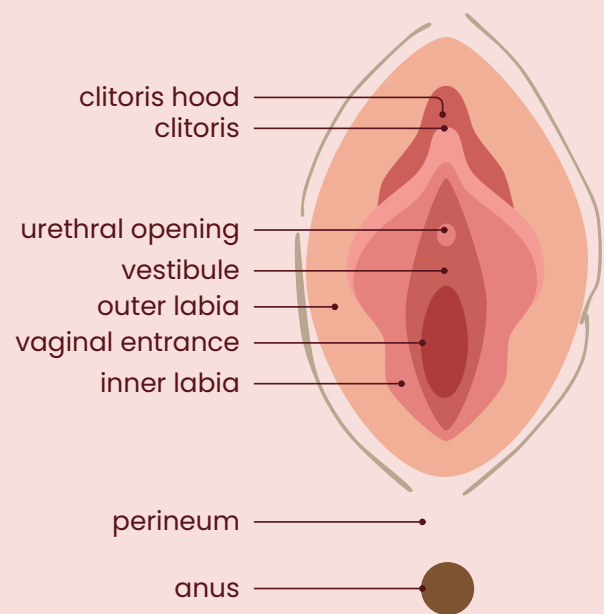
2. With clean hands, and using a mirror,

look at and feel the exterior skin area (outer lips, usually covered with pubic hair).

3. Gently part the outer lips and check the inner, hairless folds

4. Check the skin around your vagina and urinary opening (urethra - where your urine comes out).

5. Check the skin between your vagina and your anus.



What Checks Can I Perform Myself at Home

Familiarise yourself with the colour, texture, and shape of your vulva so that you have a clear sense of what is normal for you. Note any new lumps, sores, skin changes, thickening, or areas of discolouration.

When to see your GP:

If you notice any of the following, book an appointment promptly – do not wait:

- A new lump, growth, or thickening.
- Persistent itching, burning, or pain.
- Skin changes such as discolouration, sores that do not heal, or unusual texture.
- Unusual discharge or bleeding unrelated to your menstrual cycle.

These symptoms are more common after menopause but can occur at any age. They are not necessarily cause for alarm – but they do warrant a conversation with your doctor sooner rather than later.



What Checks Can I Perform Myself at Home

Mental Health Check

Mental health is health – and for women in particular, it deserves the same regular attention as any physical check. 54% of women report recent symptoms of anxiety and depression, and 88% of women experienced at least one source of distress in the last twelve months. Despite this, 29% of women who need support delay or do not get it.

A mental health check-in is not a clinical diagnosis, it's simply a deliberate pause to honestly assess how you are feeling, functioning, and coping. Building this into your routine creates an opportunity to notice changes before they escalate.



What Checks Can I Perform Myself at Home

How to perform a mental health check-in with yourself.

Set aside a few quiet minutes to reflect honestly on the following areas:

Mood: Have you been feeling persistently low, flat, anxious, or irritable?

Sleep: Are you sleeping too much, too little, or experiencing disrupted sleep?

Energy: Do you feel persistently fatigued or lacking motivation?

Concentration: Are you finding it difficult to focus or make decisions?

Connection: Have you been withdrawing from people or activities you normally enjoy?

Physical symptoms: Are you experiencing unexplained physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive changes, or muscle tension?

Coping: Does your usual way of managing stress feel like it is no longer working?

Beyond Blue's Self-Care Check is a free, anonymous online tool that takes only a few minutes and allows you to compare your daily habits and actions to the things we know can protect mental health. The **K10** is a validated tool available through Beyond Blue that can help you understand what kind of support you might need right now.

What Checks Can I Perform Myself at Home

When to see a healthcare professional:

If your check-in reveals persistent symptoms, particularly low mood, anxiety, sleep disruption, or loss of interest in daily life lasting more than two weeks – then speak with your GP.

Your GP can conduct a formal mental health assessment, discuss a Mental Health Treatment Plan, and refer you to a psychologist or other mental health professional if needed. You do not need to be in crisis to seek support. Early intervention makes a meaningful difference.

Blood Pressure Monitoring

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is one of the most significant risk factors for heart disease and stroke in Australia, and one of the most commonly undetected. It rarely causes symptoms, which is why it is often called the "silent" condition and why regular checking matters.

A blood pressure reading that could be considered normal is a systolic pressure (the top number, when your heart is pumping) under 120 mmHg and a diastolic pressure (the bottom number, when your heart is relaxing) under 80 mmHg. Keep in mind that this can vary from person to person depending on fitness, genetics, diet, alcohol consumption, and smoking.

What Checks Can I Perform Myself at Home

Blood pressure can be checked by your GP, at many pharmacies and with an at-home monitor.

How to check your blood pressure at home:

Sit quietly for five minutes before measuring.

Sit with your back supported, feet flat on the floor, and your arm resting at heart level.

Do not smoke, consume caffeine, or exercise in the 30 minutes prior to measurement.

Place the cuff on your upper arm according to the device instructions.

Take two consecutive readings one minute apart and record both results.

Take your measurements for seven days (minimum five) at around the same time in the morning or evening. Do your reading before eating, taking medication, or vigorous activity.

There is a downloadable blood pressure diary available through the Heart Foundation that you can use to record your daily values and take to your next doctor's appointment.

When to see a healthcare professional:

You should see your doctor if you have persistent high blood pressure above 140/90 mmHg.

If you record a reading significantly higher than this on a single occasion, rest for a few minutes and repeat the measurement before seeking advice. Do not rely on a single reading, blood pressure naturally fluctuates throughout the day. Any reading that concerns you is worth discussing with your GP or pharmacist.

Your Decade-by-Decade Screening Guide

Women's health screening is rarely one-size-fits-all.

What follows is a practical breakdown of what is recommended at each stage of life.

This guide is your starting point. It is not exhaustive and it is not a substitute for individualised medical advice. Think of it as your preparation tool so that you walk into every appointment informed, confident, and ready to ask the right questions.

Note: we are not covering fertility or pregnancy-related screening tests in this guide. If you wish to learn more about these, speak with your doctor.



Let's get started.

Your 20's

-  Cervical cancer screening (**starts from age 25**)
-  Blood pressure and cholesterol check (**every 2 years**)
-  Breast self-check (**regularly**)
-  Vulval self-check (**regularly**)
-  Eye test (**every 2 years**)
-  Dental check (**as advised by your dentist**)
-  Sexually transmitted infection (STI) screen (**as advised by GP**)
-  Skin check (**self-check routinely**) – discuss with your doctor how often to have skin check by doctor.

Consider based on family history and individual risk factors:

Breast cancer and bowel cancer screening if you have risk factors or a family history. Mental health check-in, kidney health checks, hearing test and type 2 diabetes screening.

Your 30's

-  Cervical cancer screening (**every 5 years**)
-  Blood pressure and cholesterol check (**every 2 years**)
-  Breast self-check (**regularly**)
-  Vulval self-check (**regularly**)
-  Eye test (**every 2 years**)
-  Dental check (**as advised by your dentist**)
-  Sexually transmitted infection (STI) screen (**as advised by GP**)
-  Skin check (**self-check routinely**) – discuss with your doctor how often to have skin check by doctor.

Consider based on family history and individual risk factors:

Breast cancer and bowel cancer screening if you have risk factors or a family history. Menopause assessment, hearing test, mental health check-in, kidney health checks and type 2 diabetes screening.

Your 40's

-  Bowel cancer (**from age 45, every 2 years**)
-  Breast cancer screening (**every 2 years**)
-  Breast self-check (**regularly**)
-  Vulval self-check (**regularly**)
-  Cervical cancer screening (**every 5 years**)
-  Menopause assessment
-  Eye test (**every 2 years**)
-  Dental check (**as advised by your dentist**)
-  Sexually transmitted infection (STI) screen (**as advised by GP**)
-  Skin check (**self-check routinely**) – discuss with your doctor how often to have skin check by doctor.
-  Heart health check (**usually starting at age 45**)
-  Type 2 diabetes screening

Consider based on family history and individual risk factors:

Kidney health check, mental health check-in.

Your 50's

-  Bone health assessment (**DEXA Scan**)
-  Bowel cancer (**every 2 years**)
-  Breast cancer screening (**every 2 years**)
-  Breast self-check (**regularly**)
-  Vulval self-check (**regularly**)
-  Cervical cancer screening (**every 5 years**)
-  Lung Cancer Screening (**at least every 2 years for current smokers, ex smokers**)
-  Menopause assessment
-  Eye test (**every 2 years**)
-  Dental check (**as advised by your dentist**)
-  Hearing test
-  Heart health check
-  Sexually transmitted infection (STI) screen (**as advised by GP**)
-  Skin check (**self-check routinely**) – discuss with your doctor how often to have skin check by doctor.
-  Heart health check
-  Type 2 diabetes screening

Consider based on family history and individual risk factors:
Kidney health check, mental health check-in.

Your 60's

- ☐ Bone health assessment (**DEXA Scan**)
- ☐ Bowel cancer (**every 2 years**)
- ☐ Breast cancer screening (**every 2 years**)
- ☐ Breast self-check (**regularly**)
- ☐ Vulval self-check (**regularly**)
- ☐ Cervical cancer screening (**every 5 years**)
- ☐ Lung Cancer Screening (**at least every 2 years for current smokers, ex smokers**)
- ☐ Menopause assessment
- ☐ Eye test (**every 2 years**)
- ☐ Dental check (**as advised by your dentist**)
- ☐ Hearing test
- ☐ Heart health check
- ☐ Kidney health check (**every 1 – 2 years**)
- ☐ Falls assessment (**at least once per year**)
- ☐ Sexually transmitted infection (STI) screen (**as advised by GP**)
- ☐ Skin check (**self-check routinely**) – discuss with your doctor how often to have skin check by doctor.
- ☐ Heart health check
- ☐ Type 2 diabetes screening (**at least every 3 years**)

Consider based on family history and individual risk factors:
Mental health check-in.

Your 70's & Beyond

-  Bone health assessment
-  Breast cancer screening (**every 2 years**)
-  Breast self-check (**regularly**)
-  Vulval self-check (**regularly**)
-  Cervical cancer screening (**up until age 74**)
-  Eye test (**every 2 years**)
-  Dental check (**as advised by your dentist**)
-  Hearing test
-  Heart health check
-  Kidney health check (**every 1 – 2 years**)
-  Falls assessment (**at least once per year**)
-  Sexually transmitted infection (STI) screen (**as advised by GP**)
-  Skin check (**self-check routinely**) – discuss with your doctor how often to have skin check by doctor.
-  Heart health check
-  Type 2 diabetes screening (**at least every 3 years**)

Consider based on family history and individual risk factors:
Bowel cancer and mental health check-in.

How To Advocate For Yourself

Knowing what to ask for is only half the equation. Here is how to have the conversation:

Be specific. Instead of "I've been feeling tired," say "I've been experiencing persistent fatigue for three months that is not relieved by sleep. Can we screen with blood tests including ferritin, thyroid function, and a full blood count?"

Write it down. Bring a list of symptoms and questions to every appointment. Doctors have limited time – a prepared patient gets more from every consultation.

Request, don't hint. "Can I please have a DEXA scan to establish a bone density baseline?" is more effective than hoping your doctor will suggest it.

Ask for copies. You are entitled to copies of your test results. Keep a record of your baseline values so you can track changes over time.

Seek a second opinion. If your concerns are dismissed, you are entitled to see another doctor. A GP with a special interest in women's health, menopause medicine, or integrative medicine may offer a different perspective.

Know your family history. Many screening recommendations are influenced by family history – particularly for breast cancer, bowel cancer, cardiovascular disease, and osteoporosis. Know your history and share it with your doctor.

Want to learn more about Health Screening?

See our resources and references on pages 35-40

No single guide can cover every screening test, risk factor, or individual circumstance.

The resources on the following pages come from trusted Australian organisations including government agencies, medical colleges, women's health organisations, and national cancer screening programs. They provide evidence-based information that can help you better understand your health, prepare for appointments, and make informed decisions about screening throughout your life.

Remember: screening recommendations may change over time as new evidence emerges, so it's always worth checking the most current guidance and discussing your personal circumstances with your healthcare professional. See pages 35–39 for recommended resources and references.

Jean Hailes for Women's Health

- Use the Health Checks for Your Age tool to identify which Health Checks you should be having.
<https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/>

Cancer Council

- Contains useful information on cancer screening programs available in Australia as well as a 'Cancer Risk Calculator' tool to identify potential individual risks that may prompt earlier screening.
<https://www.cancer.org.au/>

Health Direct

- Provides information on different health screening programs and tests.
<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/health-screening-tests>

Better Health Channel

- Provides information on regular health checks for men and women.
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/servicesandsupport/regular-health-checks>

Queensland Health

- Provides a 'Women's Health At Any Age' guide
<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/newsroom/features/womens-health-at-every-age>

Want to learn more about Health Screening?

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Appendix: Your Health Screening Checklist

Tick all tests that apply when complete

- ☐ Bone health assessment (DEXA Scan)
- ☐ Breast cancer screening (every 2 years)
- ☐ Breast self-check (regularly)
- ☐ Bowel cancer screening (every 2 years)
- ☐ Cervical cancer screening (age 25 until 74)
- ☐ Eye test (every 2 years)
- ☐ Dental check (as advised by your dentist)
- ☐ Hearing test
- ☐ Heart health check
- ☐ Kidney health check (every 1 – 2 years)
- ☐ Falls assessment (at least once per year)
- ☐ Sexually transmitted infection (STI) screen (as advised by GP)
- ☐ Skin check (self check routinely) – discuss with your doctor how often to have skin check by doctor
- ☐ Type 2 diabetes screening (at least every 3 years)
- ☐ Mental health check-in

Pretty Proven publishes evidence- based health and wellness articles for women every month.

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