

Prioritizing women's health in May

By Sheri Pope

Women's Health Month kicks off each year on Mother's Day and is reminder for women to prioritize their health by keeping up with their recommended screenings.

Cancer screenings that should be regularly scheduled based on your age and risk factors include cervical, breast and colon cancer.

Human papillomavirus (HPV) testing along with a pap test, typically done at the same time, can prevent cervical cancer. The HPV test looks for viruses that can cause cell changes on the cervix. The Pap test looks for precancers and cell changes on the cervix that can become cancer if not treated appropriately. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends testing start at age 21, screenings done every three to five years depending on age and previous results.

Breast cancer screening includes Clinical Breast Exams (CBE) and regularly scheduled mammograms. CBE paired with mammogram are good screening tools to find abnormal tissue in the breast. Early detection and screening can improve treatment outcomes, when treatment is less invasive, less costly, and easier to treat.

The mammogram is a low-dose x-ray. The machine gently compresses the breast between two plates to flatten and spread the tissue. This makes it easier to see any breast changes or abnormalities. Two views are usually taken of each breast. If there are abnormalities, additional views and ultrasound are scheduled to get a more detailed view of the tissue.

The CDC suggests women between the ages of 50 to 74 who are average risk get screened every other year. Women aged 40-49 should have a discussion with their doctor to determine the best schedule.

The new recommendation to begin colorectal cancer screening is 45 because of an increase in younger people being diagnosed with colon cancer. There are several options to choose from to test for colorectal cancer including colonoscopy and stool-based tests.

The stool tests, like the Fecal Immunochemical Test (FIT) and Cologuard are available to complete at home with different means to collect samples. The stool test should be performed every 1-3 years depending on which test you choose.

The gold standard for colorectal cancer testing is a colonoscopy. For someone with no risk factors, screening intervals might be scheduled as little as every ten years. Colonoscopy is also used as a tool for those with risk factors such as symptoms to prevent or treat early diagnosed colon cancer. If polyps are found during a colonoscopy the doctor can remove them while viewing your colon, preventing cancer from developing or removal before it spreads.

Other important screenings to keep up with your health include diabetes screenings, blood pressure checks, cholesterol tests and eye exams. Lung cancer is another suggested screening for smokers or those who have quit in the last 15 years.

RiverStone Health will host a Women's Health Fair on May 22 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Providers will offer priority scheduling for well-woman exams at the main RiverStone Health campus in downtown Billings. Community organizations will offer education, resources and more during this time. If you are due for a mammogram, the Intermountain Health mammogram coach will be on campus providing mammograms. There will be special giveaways for people who schedule their screening during the Women's Health Fair.

Call 406-247-3350 to schedule a well-woman exam or mammogram today.

If you need financial assistance for breast or cervical cancer screening, the Montana Cancer Screening Program may be able to help. To fill out an application to see if you are eligible for financial assistance go to RiverStoneHealth.org/Prevention.

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