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# Catch Up on Your Checkups

Has the pandemic put your doctor appointments on pause? Here's how to make up for lost time.

BY JESSICA MIGALA

**AMONG THE POTENTIAL** fallout from Covid-19: the general health of the nation. In a June poll of 546 women conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 60 percent said they or a family member had delayed medical or dental care because of the outbreak. Fortunately, over the past year, doctors' offices, hospitals, and clinics have found ways to function safely even during the pandemic—by mandating masks, limiting the number of people in rooms, asking patients to wait in their car, and disinfecting surfaces. So if you've skipped a checkup, you may want to consider rescheduling, especially if you were due for one of these four vital appointments:



## A PAP SMEAR AND HPV TEST

During a well-woman visit, patients receive a physical exam and may be screened for cervical cancer, which will kill approximately 4,300 women in the U.S. this year. Yet gynecologic wellness visits plummeted 86 percent during the early weeks of the pandemic, according to data from 228 U.S. hospitals. If you're between 30 and 65, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists advises getting a Pap plus HPV test (known as co-testing) every five years. (Women under age 30 should get a Pap alone every three years.) "A Pap detects precancerous changes to cells. When they're found early, doctors can remove the cells in an outpatient procedure so you never develop cervical cancer," says Jennifer Smith, MD, a board-certified ob-gyn in St. Louis.

It may seem like no big deal to put off a Pap—what's another year when you've already waited three or five? But as Smith says, "The data is really specific about the screening interval. When you start stretching it, you risk ending up with a surprise cancer diagnosis." If you missed a Pap or co-test this year, get into the office as soon as you can.

**IN THE MEANTIME:** If you notice irregular bleeding, call your ob-gyn right away.

## A SKIN CHECK

Skin cancer is by far the most common cancer. But good news: "It's curable in 99 percent of cases that are caught early," says Elizabeth K. Hale, MD, senior vice president of the Skin Cancer Foundation (SCF). The organization recommends that everyone over age 18 see a dermatologist once a year for a screening. "This appointment is quick, easy, and highly effective," says Hale. "Just by looking at the skin, we have the opportunity to find changes in moles as well as new spots and growths before they metastasize." According to a 2017 report, the average wait time to book a dermatology appointment was 32.3 days—and that was before the pandemic put nonessential skin checks on hold. Call now to see when you can get in.

**IN THE MEANTIME:** The SCF recommends examining your skin once a month from head to toe, including the scalp (use a mirror), hands, and feet. Alert a dermatologist if you see any spot, growth, or mole that's new, unusual, or different.

## A HEART AND METABOLIC SCREEN

Heart disease and stroke are responsible for one in three deaths of women annually, according to the American Heart Association. What's more, 90 percent of women will have at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease in their lifetime, says Marwa Sabe, MD, associate director of the advanced heart failure program at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. However, a study in the journal *Stroke and Vascular Neurology* found a 31 percent decline in stroke hospital

admissions this spring compared to 2019. The researchers suggest that these orders may have led people to

It's important to have your physician evaluate your heart every year. They'll read your bloodwork and likely perform a blood test to check your sugar and cholesterol, and ask about your history of heart disease as well as your personal health. (For instance, if you have preeclampsia or gestational diabetes, your risk for cardiovascular disease is higher.) This information can help doctors assess your likelihood of ticker trouble, and they can put you on how to address it. "Early detection of heart disease is preventable, so you'll want to work on a plan with your doctor as soon as you can." **IN THE MEANTIME:** Call 911 immediately if you notice the signs of a heart attack: chest pain; women (dizziness; fatigue; nausea; sweating; shortness of breath; back pain) or stroke (confusion; slurred speech; seeing, or walking, or feeling weakness in the face, arms, or

## A DENTAL EXAM

The American Dental Association has no specific recommendations on how often you should get your teeth checked, but the average healthy person should see a dentist every six months, says Cheryl DDS, assistant director of continuing education programs and clinical assistant professor at NYU College of Dentistry. "It's generally the amount of time it takes for plaque to harden into tartar," she says. "Only a professional cleaning can remove this buildup. Your dentist can also spot an emerging cavity and treat it before it becomes a bigger problem (such as an infection that requires a root canal). Poor oral health slide can affect the rest of your body, says Pezzullo: Sometimes gum disease are the first sign of conditions like diabetes and heart disease.

But about one-third of Americans don't go to a dentist on even a regular basis. And as of September, about 10 percent of people hadn't visited a dentist since the start of the pandemic, says Chad G. Pezzullo, president of the ADA. Worried about someone that close to your face? "Many dental offices have not had any documented cases of Covid transmission. If we think it wouldn't be safe, we wouldn't be opening," Gehani says. Office visits are safe, and ADA guidelines on physical exams, masks, and disinfecting, and they have the way they perform certain procedures to minimize the amount of saliva in the patient's mouth.

**IN THE MEANTIME:** The ADA recommends brushing twice a day and flossing once a day. If you have tooth pain that lasts more than a few seconds, sensitivity, swelling, a chipped or broken tooth, call your dentist, who will bring you right in.