

Women's Health Screenings Podcast Transcript

Speaker 1

Welcome and thank you for joining the Cass County Health Department Healthcast. Our healthcast is here to bring discussion and awareness to the services that we offer here at the health department as well as ongoing and current issues in women's health. I am Hillary Kelley and I am here with Louise Yale, we are both health educators here at the Cass County Health Department and with that introduction why don't we just go ahead and jump right into our first topic.

So today Louise Yale, one of our health educators here is going to talk with us a little about the importance of screenings, so Louise why don't you go ahead and give us some information about screenings.

Speaker 2

Yeah, absolutely, thank you! So some of the different topics I wanted to talk about today are especially targeted towards women's health. Some are very familiar, some are very important to our health and wellbeing, so we want to really make sure that our listeners were really focused on trying to make sure that their health and wellbeing is taken care of through some of these different screenings.

Some of these screenings are pretty simple, they can be done by yourself or others, and others as a yearly routine that require going to see your physician, OBGYN, or specialist. So it really kind of depends on what you have going on, I think it's important for you, for women to make sure they are staying up to date on their screenings as a yearly thing.

So the first screening or exam that I think is very important and can easily fit into your monthly and almost weekly routine is a self-breast exam. This is done by the women herself checking to any changes in her breast and this can be a very important way to find breast cancer early which then can be really easily treatable. This can be done as first line detection for breast cancer, so it's simple and very important step that really shouldn't be pushed to the side that most women sometimes forget about.

So a self-breast exam can be done at an early age, when women start to develop their breast. So young women can start on the right track to good habits and taking on their breast health which I think is very important for future. Making a routine of doing the self-breast exam will make you more familiar with your breasts and it's easier to tell if something is wrong or has changed over time.

So when you do your self-breast exam you want to do it monthly to familiarize with how your breast normally feel and look that way you can be able to see changes on a monthly basis. You examine yourself several days after your menstrual cycle or period ends, that way your breast will be less swollen and tender and you're going to be able to tell if there is a little bit more

difference. If you don't have a menstrual cycle say after menopause or if you're pregnant, you plan to do it the first of the month, that way the first of the month comes around you kind of know when you should be doing it.

So here are some steps and techniques to doing your self-breast exam at home. The first step you should do, you want to examine your breasts in the mirror with your shoulders straight looking at the mirror and your hands on your hips. You should be looking for your breast to be a usual size, shape, and color that's normal to you. The breast should be evenly shaped without any visible distortion or swelling, that's kind of why you do it after your menstrual cycle because that's the normal size you will probably going to be at. Here are some things you want to notice and should be brought to your attention if you see this to your doctor. If you see any dimpling, or puckering, or any bulging of the skin, if your nipple has changed positions or has inverted so it has pushed inward instead of sticking out, and if you see any redness, soreness, any rash or different swelling in certain areas that you might not have seen before. So that's one of the first steps to do doing your self-breast exam.

The next step is still doing it in the mirror, you want to raise your hands or your arms above your head and examine your breasts the same way that you did with your hands on your hips. So you're looking for similar changes, the redness, soreness, any changes in shape, any color, then just like you did when you had your arms down by your side. Then you are also looking for signs of breast fluid or discharge from your nipples especially, so while looking in the mirror you also want to look for signs coming out of your nipples, so anything that is watery, milky, or like a yellow fluid or even blood. And this is might be a little bit different for women that are pregnant, because they are lactating and stuff so you have to be a little bit aware of that, but if it is something at a time that you're not pregnant or not experiencing those kind of different things, then that's when you want to be aware of those changes and talk to your doctor about that.

So the next step when you're doing your self-breast exam is feeling your breasts for lumps while lying down. So you can do this on the floor, on your bed, you're going to use your opposite hand to feel your opposite breast, so you're going to use your right hand to feel your left breast, left hand to feel your right breast. You want to use a firm smooth touch with your first few finger pads of your hand, so you're keeping your fingers flat and together so your pointer and middle finger are good ones to use. You're going to press down with your fingers and move them in a circular motion that is about the size of a quarter. You can also do different patterns, you can do circular, I know I have seen different programs where you do a grid, just as long as you are doing it the same way each month that way you're going to be able tell if there are any kind of changes.

You want to cover the entire breast from top to bottom and side to side that way a grid pattern is a good way to follow. Then from your collar bone you want go all the way from the top all the way to the abdomen and from the armpit to the cleavage. Again there are lymph nodes in those areas that might be swollen as well that might indicate different things that might be

happening with your breasts, so that's why you want to try and go different areas. Again you want to follow a pattern to cover your whole breast.

Then you can do this while you are standing or sitting as well. A good place to do this is in the shower because your skin is a little more wet and you able to get little more firm pressing on there. So again you want to follow the similar pattern and motion as you did while you were lying down to complete that self-breast exam.

So you want to get to know how your breast feel, recognizing this and doing this monthly is going to help you see if there are different changes. There are different areas of your breast that might feel different which is normal, you want to get familiar with what your breasts feel like and that way you can recognize if they're off and might feel a bump or lump that you want to get to your doctor to test out there.

So if or when you feel a lump or bump or something that is off or has changed, you should contact your physician and schedule an appointment to be seen. Now there are more natural lumps and bumps that happen so don't panic if you feel one but it could be just natural breast tissue or a benign lump but it doesn't hurt to call your doctor if you have a concern. Make sure you are asking questions on the phone or when you see your doctor just to make sure you get everything covered when you get that exam.

Good example, kind of a personal story, when I was in high school, summer of high school I was at a volleyball camp and I noticed a lump in my neck that I hadn't noticed before and it kept kind of getting bigger and bigger. So I talked to my mom right after I got home from that volleyball camp and she went and scheduled an appointment right away and I got in and my doctor was a little concerned cause you know I was a teenager, I was healthy, active, it was a little out of the ordinary. So she did a whole breast exam and everything just to be sure and they did find a different lump so I had to have some extra procedures done and luckily it was all regular breast tissue and benign but it never hurts to get those checked out. It just kind of ones of those things where you know your body the best especially your breast area so make sure if you have any concerns that you talk to your doctor or physician.

The next screening I'm going to talk about that I think is pretty important is a breast exam by your doctor. This is another screening tool that should be completed on pretty much a yearly basis and it will depend on your physician of when they want to do a breast exam, sometimes they do it every 1-3 years depending on your health history or your risk for breast cancer. This should start at the age of 20 and you want to go to the age of 40 then after that it should be done every year along with different mammogram screenings that we're going to talk about a little bit later.

Another reason why these breast exams for yourself or by your doctor is very important is because there are very many lymph nodes that are located in your upper body around the breast area. Lymph nodes, if you don't know, are glands that are part of your body's immune system and help to filter substances through your lymphatic system that contain lymphocytes

which are your white blood cells, I know were going a little more scientific, but these white blood cells help to fight off a lot of infections and disease in your body. If there are any sort of cancer that hits that lymphatic system, it's pretty hard for your body to fight that off, so it's pretty important that we were doing those exams so we can tell if it's hitting our lymph node system.

Some of the biggest clusters are found in the axilla area which is in the armpit area and even there are 20-40 glands just in that area so other areas that can be found are in your neck, chest, abdomen, and groin area as well. Like I said, your neck, chest, abdomen and in also your armpit that's right around that breast area so there are bigger clumps up there so breast cancer cells can reach those a little bit quicker so it's important that breast exams to find these lumps or abnormalities can be detected for early treatment.

So Hillary, women that are breast feeding might experience different changes or lumps while they are breast feeding, what are some of your suggestions or recommendations for women during that time frame?

Speaker 1

Yes, absolutely, this is a really, really good question, because your breasts feel much different during lactation, they're busy, they have a lot more to do and they have different tendencies and different things can kind of occur, they seem like hiccups, but they can all be overcome during lactation and finding lumps or experiencing even painful lumps and things like that occur very commonly in lactation. So if you are breast feeding and you feel a lump, it might be painful, it may not be painful, you can always consult a lactation consultant and that person will more than likely be working within an interdisciplinary team that includes your physician as well.

No one is ever going to tell you to let it go, it's always going to be best to discuss that with a physician but during lactation when you have inflammation within the breast and the milk cannot actually pass through the duct based on that inflammation you can get what feels like a back-up and it feels like a lump. It can feel very painful, it can cause what is called mastitis, which is an inflammation of the breast. So people with mastitis will feel that lump, sometimes they can't feel it, but it is there, it causes fever, flu like symptoms, redness of the breast tissue so there are quite a few red flags that come along with mastitis that are going to really prompt most lactating women to call the doctor because you are looking for a solution pretty quickly. It hurts and it can be a big barrier to the breast feeding relationship as well.

But there are other types of lumps that you can be found in lactation, they are less common, but it's a lump, all the same. It's always really good to consult your doctor and if you're working with a lactation consultant, that person will say the same thing, some of these lumps can be directly related to lactation but there's always that chance that it is not.

Speaker 2

Well especially during that time you are going through so many hormonal changes with having this child and that can really exacerbate some of those cells that might be in there and they just don't come out until then. It's always good to just double check, make sure you are checking with your doctor, it never hurts to do an extra test here or there.

Speaker 1

Absolutely, and you know with testing, typically your doctor will not schedule you for a mammogram if you're lactating because it can make that imaging a lot harder to read in a lactating breast. But they will assess your situation and proceed from there because it's always worth you know, if it needs to be done it needs to be done. And they'll typically figure that out relatively quickly.

Speaker 2

I think that is a great way to add to it, I know we are always talking about preventative measures, but now we're talking about experiences here. It's good to always add that into what women that are breastfeeding or lactating might experience and just again just to make sure that you are always on and know the changes and if you are concerned, don't hesitate to call your doctor.

Speaker 1

Absolutely!

Speaker 2

So since Hillary mentioned mammograms in that segment earlier, mammograms are another screening tool that we're going to talk about that women should be familiar with for their breast health.

This is used to take two images of each breast and the breast tissue using x-rays to see if there are any abnormalities, lumps, or bumps. This is one of the better ways to detect breast cancer early and then be able to treat it, imaging is very close, and it can be very well able to detect those. Now the process may be uncomfortable, I know a lot of women are not always thrilled to go do it because the breast is placed on a platform and slowly compressed until its flattened enough to get the images and it's done a couple times. This is done for both breasts to get the appropriate images and it takes about 30 minutes, so it's not an extremely long procedure but for that 30 minutes it can be uncomfortable. Then the radiologist will then examine the imaging, send the results to your doctor and you should hear back in about a week depending on time frame of what the doctor is busy with.

The typically age to start getting mammograms is at the age of 40, this is kind of when most women are starting to decrease their pregnancy stage and when research has shown that cancer starts to get detected more or grows or metastasizes. Now women who have a strong

family history of breast cancer, either maternal or paternal which they have been finding is prevalent as well, or that find signs of lumps or abnormalities may get a mammogram earlier in age it just depends on what you got going on. Again, this is the best way for early detection of breast cancer along with your self-breast exam and yearly physical exam with your doctor. It is a very important tool to be used for most women.

Now most insurance companies will cover the cost of mammograms as preventative care that's why every one to two years, that's why it's more important because your insurance company is going to cover it. For those women that do not have insurance, there are programs out there that will assist with low cost or free mammograms. For Illinois, we have the Illinois Breast and Cervical Cancer Program that will help low income women in Illinois to obtain low cost or even free mammograms along with cervical cancer screenings, so this is a very important tool that women out there that might not have the insurance coverage can still get that mammogram or cervical cancer screening.

Women starting at the age of 40 should get a mammogram every year for as long as the woman is in good health, until the age of 54. Then starting at the age of 55, women can get mammograms every two years or they can choose to do it every year just kind of depends on what your health history is, what you and your doctor kind of talk about for progressive or preventative programs for that age group.

So other options after a mammogram if cancer is suspected, there are other tests that can be done if a lump or abnormality is found such as 3-D mammograms which takes a little more multiple images through the same x-ray but recreates a 3-D image of your breast tissue and it can show a little more dense especially if you have a more dense breast tissue it can go a little bit further. Another tool is a breast ultrasound which are sound waves to produce pictures of the internal structures of your breast, just gives a little more deeper imaging. Then there is a breast MRI which can be more detailed and are used to examine tiny masses and tiny tissues of changes in the breast tissue. Then there are biopsies that can be done as well which are a little bit more invasive. But then there is a newer one that I haven't quite heard of yet but could be a good alternative or extension of mammogram is thermography. This uses infrared heat emissions to detect different breast or cancer tissues and I've seen over the years at first it wasn't quite as detailed but over the years with new technology it has gotten a little bit more detailed so they can use that as well instead of mammograms or after mammograms.

So the next screening that we're going to talk is about cervical cancer. This is another screening that should be completed by women starting at the age of 21. Getting to be more sexually active so it's kind of more prevalent and important to do that. Early detection with proper tests and screenings could help to detect cancer early and can be treated quickly and appropriately just like with breast cancer.

The Pap test and HPV test can help to prevent cervical cancer and can find it early. The Pap test or also called the Pap smear which we all kind of know looks for pre-cancer cells or cell changes

on the cervix that might become cervical cancer if not treated appropriately. The HPV test looks for the virus the Human Papillomavirus test, that's hard to say, the papillomavirus test that can cause the cells to change to cancer. Good way again to go by that virus is HPV. This is one of the main viruses that can cause cervical cancer so it's really important that you get this test as well along with your pap smear, most of the time they're going to check both of them when your doctor does that pap smear test.

Both tests can be done in your doctor's office or clinic, the Pap test, the doctor will use a plastic or metal instrument called a speculum, it helps to widen your vagina so they can look in there. They examine the vagina and cervix while also collecting a few cells and mucus from the cervix around the area and then it's sent to the lab for testing from there. During both testing's the cells are both checked for normality or contain that HPV virus. And this can feel uncomfortable again, just like that mammogram we were talking about, but it's not for a very long time, it's usually a pretty quick exam and it can be done really quick in that doctors' office along with that breast exam.

Starting at the age of 21, women should start to get their pap smears and screenings. If the Pap test is normal, your doctor may tell you can wait about three years until the next one is done, if not, if it's abnormal for some reason, they might do further testing or they might say you have to get it the next year, just depends on your physician. Some women may want to get tested earlier in their years, especially if they are very sexually active earlier before the age of 21, and especially for HPV because it can be transmitted pretty easily through sexual activity, especially too if they have not gotten that HPV vaccine which helps prevents that Human Papillomavirus. It's kind of important depending on how active you are to get testing a little bit earlier.

HPV which you might not know of, is also known as the Human Papillomavirus and is the most common STI or Sexually Transmitted Infection between sexually active people. There are many types of HPV and some may not cause any health issues where other strains may cause different things like genital warts and even cancer, cause that's the biggest concern why you should get tested for HPV regularly. A person who has HPV might not know it and it can be spread to another person through sexual intercourse, so it's kind of hard sometimes to see if there are any signs or symptoms especially later in the years, you might transmit it from someone years earlier and not have any signs. So it is kind of important to get these testing's because you might not show the signs.

HPV is one of the bigger viruses that can cause cancer especially cervical cancer but it can also cause cancer of the vulva, the vagina, and the anus for women, so there are a couple other strains there that can cause some very serious issues. Getting screened is big way to help prevent and even detect cancer from developing and escalating further into your life. And also getting vaccinated as well can help prevent the HPV from causing different health issues such as the STI's and potentially cervical cancer.

Once you are at the age range of 30-65 years old, women can talk to their doctor about which testing is right or better for them. If you get a pap test only and it comes back normal your doctor may allow you to wait 3 years until you get the next one. If you get the HPV test only and results come back normal you may be able to wait 5 years until your next screening. There is a co-testing as well of the Pap and HPV, and if those results come back normal your doctor may tell you can wait again 5 years until your next screening. So you can have that plan with your physician once you get to that age.

Once you hit the age of 65, your doctor may tell you that you don't need to be screened anymore especially if you've had normal screening tests in the past for several years or you've had your cervix removed as part of a total hysterectomy or non-cancerous conditions like fibroids. Again, kind of having a plan with your doctor is pretty important there. This should be a part of your routine wellness visits with your doctor or OBGYN, early detection is key to treatment and survival with these different kind of conditions especially cervical cancer. These kind of tests or screenings are covered by your health insurance as a routine wellness screening but for those that do not have insurance again there are programs out there to assist for low cost or free cervical cancer screenings. Again the Illinois Breast and Cervical Cancer Program is available for women in Illinois that have no insurance to get a pap or HPV testing and screening that is needed for or to protect women's health. Here at the Cass County Health Department we can help you get that screening and get you signed up for that different program there.

So one thing that I'm sure women don't always think about or are not on their radar for screening is looking for colorectal cancer. Colorectal cancer is the third leading form of cancer found in women behind breast and lung cancer so it is very important to get screening for early detection. I know we kind of talked about earlier that ovarian cancer is creeping up there on that chart and that's where pap smears and various tests for pap smears can detect that as well.

Colorectal cancer affects what we know as the colon and rectum in humans. This can affect the large and small intestines which in turn includes the rectum of the person. Colorectal cancer spreads, and why it is so important to keep up to date on these screenings is that when cancer forms in the colon it forms what is called polyps, and these polyps can grow into the walls of the colon and rectum over time. And if you know anatomy a little bit, it's not everyone's strong suit, the wall of the colon are made up of many layers and when cancer starts to form as these polyps they can grow outward into these layers and spread from there. When these cancer cells are in these walls of the colon they can grow and get into the blood vessels and lymph vessels which from there can travel to nearby lymph nodes or to other distance part of the body spreading those cancer cells, so that's why it's more importance because it can spread a little more easily. And then again, like we talked about earlier, the lymph nodes are part of that lymphatic system which is part of the body's immune system. So the lymph node and lymph vessels carry that clear watery fluid called lymph which contains those white blood cells that

help fight infection. That's how polyps can spread cancer throughout the body that's why these screenings are important for early detection so they don't spread into those lymph nodes.

So early detection is important to detect the spread of this cancer. So there are a few various tests that can be done to detect colorectal cancer, one of the easier and more convenient steps is getting a stool sample. This can be done in the doctor's office or there are kits that can be taken home with instructions on how to collect that sample and then send it to a lab for analysis and results. This test checks your stool for signs of polyps, blood, and then cancer on an annual basis or yearly basis. This take home test is called a Fecal Immunochemical Test or FIT test. These tests are offered here at Cass County Health Department for those that would like to do it at home. It is definitely a more convenient, less invasive, and less prep work than your traditional colonoscopy that we'll talk about later.

So another screening that may be done and is important to detect colorectal cancer is a Sigmoidoscopy where the doctor or physician inserts a short thin kind of flexible lighted tube into your rectum and checks for polyps and cancer cells. This is done every 5 years in your doctor's office so it's not quite again the prep as the colonoscopy. Then the big one, like we're going to talk about and very important is the colonoscopy. That's where kind of people get a little scared about and nervous because it is more prep work and you do actually have to get sedated during the process but it is very important because it really allows the doctor to see the whole colon and rectum in more detail. This screening can detect polyps more easily and if one is found during the procedure they can remove right then and there which kind is a little more easy feeling because you get it out of there.

This is done more on every 10 years for regular screenings unless of course there are cancer cells found or you have a higher risk of colorectal cancer from family history. So usually you don't complete this type of screening until you get into your 40s and maybe closer to 50s, it kind of depends on your health care provider and his or her recommendations. Those that are ages 18-39 this screening is not necessary unless you have a strong history of colorectal cancer, or Lynch Syndrome, or condition like ulcerative colitis, or Crohn's disease, I know I bashed that one. Then the doctor might recommend those screenings in order to keep track of that a little bit more. So again, depending on your family history and physician, these screenings for colorectal cancer might start at the age of 45 so talk with your physician or someone that you might want to get on the right test or screening for you. Then once you hit the age of 50, a colonoscopy is performed every 10 years with other screenings such as the FIT kits which is done every year.

Speaker 1

So in addition to these very important types of screenings, I'm going to bring up a couple more of screenings that people sometimes don't always think to take a little bit of time out of there day to just basically get a general physical, seeing your doctor, checking in, making sure you get your blood work annually. It is really important to measure those vitamin levels, and you know

me personally I went in for yearly physical, had blood work taken and they called back and said “wow your B-12 levels are bottoming out”. And so I was taken injections weekly for about a month but it really made a huge difference in my energy levels, just overall capabilities you know and it was something that I didn’t know or detect, in our busy lives it’s really easy to think “oh I’m tired because my day was this, that or the other”. There could be other factors affecting your health that you just don’t know of unless you go in and take the 20 minutes it takes to go see your doctor, get checked out, get some blood work done, and just make sure everything is running like it should be.

Speaker 2

So what are some other things they check with blood work, so what are some of the big things that they check for?

Speaker 1

I think some of the big things that they check with blood work in addition to vitamin levels, I do think that the vitamin levels are a really big one, I think they are significant as you’re aging as well.

Speaker 2

Like a lack of things in your diet probably.

Speaker 1

Yes, exactly lack of things in your diet, you’re going to be looking at cholesterol levels, again when you’re aging you’re eating this that and the other when you were 25 or 30, now you’re 45 or 50, you’re eating the same.

Speaker 2

Yeah! Things change.

Speaker 1

Exactly, you’re eating the same way that might not be the best dietary choice anymore and alterations need to be made to your diet and nutritional needs. Which you know typically is not so severe where you are cutting everything you know and love out but it does help to know that your levels in your blood are where they should be. And most of the time if you are not feeling the symptoms of high blood pressure, cholesterol problems, or you know really severe vitamin deficiencies, if you’re feeling those symptoms then you are probably going to the doctor for another reason and that’s a separate avenue but everything in your blood work it shows where “hey we can make a bit of an improvement here”, it’s good to know that before a problem begins.

In addition to just general physical blood work and things, vision screenings are another tool that are very important for women to keep up annually. I think a lot of us tend to associate vision with glasses, I need my glasses checked, or I need my new contacts so I'm doing this here but it really does serve a very serious purpose in addition to that, especially as women age. There are other issues that can be detected in vision screening such as different various eye disease, cataracts, and glaucoma. So there are some of the more popular things that people are probably familiar with one way or another, most people know somebody that is affected by cataracts or glaucoma so even though that tends to be an advanced age thing, it doesn't always have to be that way. Taking the time for a vision screening is great and The American Optometric Association recommends a professional vision assessment or screening by an optometrist every 2 years for people ages 18-60 and every year for those 61 years of age and older.

So dental screenings are another very important screening to be aware of, I think most people are aware that it's recommended to go to the dentist every 6 months but it's important to keep up. It's not always everybody's favorite form of screening but it's not so bad. And for kids too, I think it's great, kids should be seeing a dentist as soon as their teeth are present, they should be learning how to brush and learning how to become accustomed to being screened so that experience stays positive for them throughout their whole life of having of good oral health.

Oral health is connected to your overall wellness. Infections in your teeth and in the gums can quickly get into the bloodstream and affect your overall wellness. The connective tissue in your mouth is connected through your body all the way down to your toes, all the way to your fingertips. A lot of about the way you take care of your mouth, your oral health, has a really direct connection to your overall general wellness. Dental screenings are a very important screening to keep up with and here at the Cass County Health Department we have a wonderful team of people who are available to help and get scheduled and come in and keep up with your screenings.

So thanks everybody for joining us and we hope that this Healthcast has been informative and helpful to all of you out there listening. We bring this information to you to educate and enlighten the public on the importance of various health concerns and topics that will be beneficial to the improvement and health and the wellbeing for the people here in our community.

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If you have any questions or would like to suggest a topic, please call the Cass County Health Department at 217-452-3057 and ask for Louise or myself Hillary. And again thank you so much for joining us and until the next time, please visit us online on our social media accounts, we're on Facebook, we're on Instagram, we're on Twitter or you can visit us online at casscohealth.org. Until next time, stay well!