



Cancer

Sometimes you can't see cancer and you don't feel sick. These cancers are invisible. That's why it is important to have your health checks with your family doctor but also to have cancer screenings / check-ups which is where they check for invisible cancers inside you.

If you have cancer screenings / check-ups then the doctors have a better chance of finding the cancer very early. Treatment can be more effective when cancer is found early and in Australia lots of things can be done about cancer. Keep an eye out for any unusual changes to your body, such as:

- lumpiness or a thickened area in your breasts, any changes in the shape or colour of your breasts, unusual nipple discharge, a nipple that turns inwards (if it hasn't always been that way) or any unusual pain.
- a lump in the neck, armpit or anywhere else in the body.
- sores or ulcers that don't heal.
- coughs or hoarseness that won't go away or coughing up blood.
- changes in toilet habits that last more than two weeks, blood in a bowel motion.
- new moles or skin spots, or ones that have changed shape, size or colour, or that bleed.
- unusual vaginal discharge or bleeding.
- unexplained weight loss.

If you have any unusual changes like these make an appointment with your family doctor as soon as possible and tell them about these changes. They may not be caused by cancer but it is important that your doctor checks these changes.

More information on cancer

There is an organisation called the Cancer Council who can give lots of information about all types of Cancers. If you want to talk to someone at the Cancer Council this is what you can do:

Call 13 14 50, Monday to Friday 9am-5pm

Say the language you need

Wait on the line for an interpreter (may take up to 3 minutes)

Ask the interpreter to call the Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20

Talk to the Cancer Council Helpline with the help of your interpreter.

Breast Screening

Sometimes there are changes in your breasts. It is common to have changes in your breasts through-out your life and most of the changes in breasts are not breast cancer. It is important to get to know how your breasts feel and look normally, and check your breasts yourself regularly by feeling them and looking at them in the mirror.

This can help you to see if you have any changes to how your breasts look – sometimes it looks bumpy like the skin of an orange, or you can feel lumps of some sort. It is important to go to your family doctor GP and have these lumps checked. Also, if you have changes to the shape or look of your nipple or have discharge coming from your nipple you should see your GP doctor.

The doctor may examine the breasts and ask some questions about your breast change. This information helps the doctor decide whether they need to do some tests to find out more about the changes.

Tests that the doctor might want you to have are a mammogram where an x-ray picture of the inside of your breasts is taken and/or an ultrasound which are more detailed pictures of the inside of your breasts. The doctor may also want you to have a biopsy or a core biopsy. This is when a needle is used to get some cells out of the part of the breast that has changed so the cells can be looked at under a microscope. There are a number of reasons for changes in the breasts. Some changes are caused by hormone changes. Sometimes hormones cause swollen or tender or lumpy breasts at times during your menstrual cycle, or if you are using contraception or having medication that replaces hormones.

Sometimes lumps are cysts. Cysts are lumps with fluid inside. Cysts are not cancer and they can be drained by the doctor with a needle. Sometimes lumps are cancer.

It can be hard for you to tell the difference between the types of lumps so it is very important to go to the doctor so they can check them.

You can get breast cancer at any age but it is more common for older women. This is why the government recommends screening with a mammogram.

All women aged 50 to 74 years are encouraged to have a free mammogram every two years through BreastScreen Australia. All women aged 40 to 49 years who have no breast symptoms also have free access to the BreastScreen Australia program should they choose to have a screening mammogram.

If you have breast cancer in your family you might need to have one sooner. If you have felt something different or you worried about anything to do with your breasts, speak to your GP doctor. Ask for an interpreter if needed.

It is important that breast cancer is found early so it can be treated quickly. This gives you the best chances of stopping sickness from cancer. You can ask to see a female doctor if this would make you feel more comfortable.

Cervical Cancer

The cervix is at the top of the vagina and is the opening from your uterus / womb The Pap smear is used to check changes in the cervix (at the top of the vagina) that might be cancer.

The Pap smear is a simple test that can be done by a GP doctor, nurse or women's health worker. Cells are collected from the cervix with a small brush and placed (smear) onto a slide. The slide is sent to a laboratory where the cells are tested for anything unusual. They need to use a microscope to see the tiny cells. The test usually only takes a few minutes and drugs or anaesthetics aren't required.

If abnormal changes are found at screening, further tests will be done to see if treatment is needed. You can ask to see a female doctor if this would make you feel more comfortable.

The Pap smear does not check for other problems in the reproductive system including ovarian cancer. It is not a check for sexually transmitted infections.

Women who are worried that they may have a sexually transmitted infection should talk to their general practitioner about the tests and treatments available. Also if you are starting a new relationship and thinking about having sex it is really good to talk to your GP doctor about ways for you and your partner to be safe.