

## Staying healthy in your 20s

*Editor's note: with this article the Phoenix begins a four-part series about women's health. Look for "staying healthy in your 30s" in the spring issue.*

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As a woman in your 20s, life is laid out before you as a path of possibilities. The world awaits, and anything is possible. You have dreams; you have plans; you have goals. What you may not have is time to be sick.

For the most part, thankfully, women in their 20s are healthy. But, they are not immune from health problems. While rare, young women can be diagnosed with terrible diseases, such as cancer or heart disease, and some even die from these diseases. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), cancer and heart disease are the causes of death for 13 percent of women ages 20 to 24 and 24 percent of women ages 25 to 34.

Alpha Sigma Alpha member Patti Balwanz, BΣ, was one of those women. Diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 24, Patti died in 2003. But she also left a legacy of hope and education for sisters and young women across the country.

Along with friend and sister Kim George Carlos, BΣ, who was diagnosed with breast cancer at 30, Patti co-authored a book, *Nordy's at Noon*, to help support and educate young women about breast cancer. Today, Kim is cancer-free.

While stories like Patti's are tragic and rare, a woman's risk of serious disease does grow with each passing year. But you don't have to become a statistic. You can take steps today to protect yourself and help maintain a lifetime of health.

"Taking care of yourself and being familiar with your body is really what you need to do at this age," says

Dr. Peter Marcus, an OB/GYN and associate professor at Indiana University School of Medicine. "You want

to avoid problems down the road in your 40s and 50s.”

### Visit your doctor

Visit your doctor annually to receive a clinical breast exam and Pap test. You could visit your family doctor, an OB/GYN, a certified nurse midwife or another qualified medical professional.

“It doesn’t matter who does it, it just needs to be done,” Dr. Marcus explains.

### Consider the HPV vaccine

One of the newest medical breakthroughs in the prevention of cervical cancer is the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine. According to the CDC, HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States. At least 50 percent of sexually active people will get HPV at some time in their lives. There are about 100 types of HPV, and some strains can lead to abnormal cell growth in the cervix and, eventually, cervical cancer.

Gardasil, the vaccine developed to fight HPV, is now available and is recommended for girls starting as early as nine and women up to 26 years of age. The vaccine is administered in a series of three injections over a six-month period. Tests have shown that it is highly effective in preventing infection from the types of HPV that cause up to 70 percent of all cervical cancers.

Ideally, the vaccine should be administered before potential exposure to HPV through sexual contact; however, it is not too late for sexually active young women to be vaccinated. Most women can still benefit from the vaccine. Talk to your doctor to see if it is appropriate for you.

### Do breast self-exams

While the effectiveness of monthly breast self exams (BSE) has been debated in recent studies, most doctors still recommend you monitor your breasts monthly.

“It’s good for you to understand your own breasts and know when you have changes,” says Mary Blackburn, a certified nurse midwife in Indianapolis. “It’s still wise for a woman to know her own body.”

### Learn your history

Talk to your family about your health history. Key factors to ask about include a history of:

- Cancer
- Heart disease

- Diabetes
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure

Each of these factors could put you at a higher risk for illness or disease later in life. Based on your history, your doctor might schedule early detection tests to establish a baseline or to monitor your condition.

### Practice safe sex

If you are going to have sex, be safe, Blackburn says. Be careful about when and with whom.

“Having fewer partners and using protection is so important,” Blackburn says.

If you are sexually active, ask your doctor to test for exposure to sexually transmitted disease (STD). Sometimes, a person affected by an STD can have few—or no—symptoms; however, if left untreated, an STD can lead to possible damage to reproductive organs. If an STD is detected, prompt treatment can be given.

Also, if you choose to be sexually active, use protection. Nearly half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, says Dr. Marcus.

### Take a multi-vitamin

Taking a multi-vitamin designed for women will have two benefits:

- Help ensure that you receive the recommended amounts of nutrients.
- Provide folic acid, which helps prevent birth defects in the event of a pregnancy.

### Wear sunscreen

Wear sunscreen every day. Doctors recommend a product with a SPF factor of at least 15. A SPF of 30 to 45 is even better. Not only will using sunscreen help protect against deadly skin cancer, but it will also help prevent wrinkles and help your skin age more beautifully, Blackburn says.

“Skin cancer is such a preventable thing,” Blackburn explains. “Your daily regimen should include sunscreen.”

Many moisturizers and foundation products today include sunscreen, so adding sun protection to your routine is an easy step. Blackburn also cautions that artificial exposure from tanning beds is also harmful. She recommends using bronzers instead.

## What tests do I need?

Here is a general list of early detection tests recommended for women in their 20s.

- Pap test: All women should begin cervical cancer screening after they become sexually active, but no later than 21 years old. Screening should be done every year with the regular Pap test or every two years using the newer liquid-based Pap test.
- Clinical breast exam: A doctor should perform a clinical breast exam at least every three years for women in their 20s and 30s and every year for women 40 and older.

Talk to your doctor at your annual exam (you should be going every year!) about your specific medical history to determine your individual needs. Based on your family medical history, your doctor might recommend other tests, such as blood tests to check cholesterol or blood sugar.

### Don’t smoke

Don’t start smoking. And if you do smoke, quit.

According to the American Cancer Society, lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death for both men and women in the United States, and 87 percent of lung cancer deaths can be attributed to tobacco use. Using tobacco also causes increased risk for cancer of the mouth, nasal cavities, larynx, pharynx, esophagus, stomach, liver, pancreas, kidney, bladder, uterine, cervix and myeloid leukemia. Tobacco use accounts for nearly one third of all cancer deaths.

But cancer is not the only risk associated with smoking. Women who smoke also greatly increase their risk of heart disease and stroke, and smoking can even lead to fertility problems.

Quitting isn’t easy, but it’s necessary. Talk to your doctor about local smoking cessation programs, or visit the American Cancer Society web site at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

Leading cause of death for females (all ages) in 2002

- Heart disease: 28.6 percent
- Cancer: 21.6 percent
- Stroke: 8 percent

Leading cause of death for females ages 20 to 24 in 2002

- Unintentional injury: 39 percent
- Homicide: 9.8 percent
- Cancer: 8.9 percent
- Suicide: 7.4 percent
- Heart disease: 4.4 percent

Leading cause of death for females ages 25 to 34 in 2002

- Unintentional injury: 23.3 percent
- Cancer: 15.9 percent
- Heart disease: 8.2 percent
- Suicide: 7.2 percent
- Homicide: 6.5 percent

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

## Maintain healthy weight

Obesity is a growing problem in the United States. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, about 30 percent of U.S. adults (20 years and older) are obese—that's more than 60 million people.

Being obese—and even just overweight—is not only a problem for a woman's image. It can have devastating health effects, as well. According to the CDC, being overweight or obese increases the risk of a variety of health conditions, including:

- Heart disease
- Type 2 diabetes
- Stroke
- Sleep apnea and respiratory problems
- Some cancers
- High blood pressure

To help you determine whether you are obese, overweight or at a healthy weight, be aware of your body mass index (BMI), a number calculated from a person's weight and height. BMI provides a reliable indicator of body fatness for most people and is used to screen for weight categories that may lead to health problems.

To calculate your BMI, check out <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/index.htm> or talk with your doctor.

Practice a diet of moderation, recommends Dr. Scott Renshaw, assistant professor of clinical family medicine at Indiana University School of Medicine.

"People can eat a piece of chocolate cake, but not the whole cake," he explains.

The key to eating wisely is to select a variety of nutrient-packed foods daily and to stay within your daily calorie needs. According to the "Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005," a healthy eating plan is one that:

- Emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains and fat-free or low-fat milks and milk products.
- Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs and nuts.
- Is low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium) and added sugars.

"Dietary Guidelines for Americans" is published jointly every five years by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Agriculture. The guidelines provide authoritative advice about how good dietary habits can promote health and reduce risk of major chronic diseases.

For more information about healthy food choices, visit [www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines/](http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines/).

## Get regular exercise

Create an exercise routine where you move daily, if possible. According to the CDC and American College of Sports Medicine, adults should strive to engage in moderate-intensity physical activities for at least 30 minutes on five or more days each week.

"Make that a part of your life, just like brushing your teeth," Blackburn says.

Even if you can't dedicate time daily for exercise, make the effort to move. Here are a few tips to get moving throughout your day:

- Park your car farther from your destination or get off the bus a few blocks away.
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator.
- Take fitness breaks—walking or doing desk exercises—instead of coffee breaks.
- Walk while doing errands instead of driving.

- Exercise while watching TV—use hand weights, exercise machine or stretch.
- Dance to music.
- Socialize while exercising. For example, walk every Saturday morning with friends.

## Be safety conscious

Unintentional injury and homicide are two of the top factors in the deaths of women in their 20s, according to the CDC. These should also be two of your top considerations to stay healthy, Blackburn says. Be aware of your safety at all times, and protect yourself:

- Use the buddy system when going to parties or out on the town.
- Protect your drink at bars or parties
- Wear your seatbelt.
- Don't drink and drive or ride with someone who has been drinking.

## Protect your mental health

Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death for women in their 20s, so protecting your mental health is also key to maintaining physical health. Mental health issues can often emerge in young adulthood, Dr. Renshaw says. If you have any concerns—you might wonder if something is "normal"—talk to your doctor.

"It's easier if we can catch and treat issues early," Dr. Renshaw explains.

Blackburn also recommends building solid friendships and relationships, which can have a positive effect on your mental health.

"Health is not just our physical well-being," Blackburn explains. "It's also important to maintain healthy relationships."

## On the web

To learn more, visit these web sites:

**American Cancer Society:**

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

**American Heart Association:**

[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

**Body Mass Index:**

<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/index.htm>

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:**

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

**Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005:**

[www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines/](http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines/)

**National Institutes of Health:**

[www.health.nih.gov/](http://www.health.nih.gov/)