

What is screening? ¹

Regular [screening](#) increases the likelihood of early detection and treatment of a disease—and the likelihood of a good outcome. Screening tests can find diseases early, when they are easier to treat, and before they become life threatening. Criteria for appropriate screening tests include:

- The disease being screened for must be reasonably common and have a significant effect on either length or quality of life;
- Acceptable, effective treatment must exist, and the condition must have a symptom-free period during which detection and treatment can improve outcome;
- Treatment during the symptom-free period must be superior to treatment once symptoms occur; and,
- The screening test must be safe, affordable, and have adequate *sensitivity* (i.e. the test usually comes out positive in people who have the disease) and *specificity* (i.e. the test usually comes out negative in people who do not have the disease).

Which tests you should have, and how often you should have them, depends on your age, sex, medical history, family history and lifestyle choices. Ask your health care provider which screening tests apply to you, and when and how often you should be tested.

¹ [Harvard Center for Cancer Prevention.](#)
[Harvard School of Public Health](#)