

Women's Health RISKS by Age

By Tandy G. Olsen, MD

How can I decrease my risk of illness or death?

This question is often the reason for preventive or wellness visits to the doctor. To answer this question, it helps to understand what the leading causes of death are for women of different age groups.

THE TEENAGE YEARS

The teenage years are characterized by experimentation and learning one's limits. Girls and young women are testing boundaries and learning about relationships with other people. As such, it is not surprising that the leading causes of death in teenage girls are unintentional injuries and accidents. Two other leading causes of death are suicide and assault.

20 - 39 YEARS

As a woman matures, the risks of accidents or injuries begin to decrease and are replaced by the risk of cancer. Diabetes and cardiovascular diseases appear in the leading causes of death as well. Risks of death from HIV infection and liver diseases also appear in the top 10.

40 - 64 YEARS

Surprisingly, the leading causes of death do not change much in this age group. Malignancy remains the number one cause of death. The risks of diabetes, stroke, and heart diseases increase and the risk of accidents decreases, but the leading categories are essentially the same.

65 YEARS AND OLDER

The leading causes of death in women in this age group are heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Other causes, such as infections and Alzheimers disease, also appear on the list.

PREVENTION

While some of the diseases listed on the left are difficult or impossible to prevent, there are things that can be done to decrease a person's risk.

Young women should know to act responsibly, to wear seat belts and drive carefully, and to be careful in their relationships with others. Their families and friends need to watch for signs of depression or self-injury and to discuss concerns with these girls.

Diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension are often closely related to obesity and lifestyle. Proper diet and exercise can largely prevent these diseases, particularly if these habits are formed as children and practiced throughout life.

Many cancers cannot be prevented, but one's risk of death from cancer can be decreased. Sunscreen decreases the risk of skin cancer. Early detection of precancerous conditions or early cancers are possible through screening examinations done at wellness visits with your physician.

If you have concerns about any of these conditions, please address your concerns with your personal physician.

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