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A 'wellness check' for every adult in Australia

All people in Australia require concise information about health risk factors, screening and preventive health care. National expert guidelines recommend simple screening tests to prevent or detect serious illness. A 'wellness check' at a local general practice clinic is a good health habit for every person aged 18 years and over.

■ **The increase in life expectancy in Australia over the past century was achieved largely by advances in sanitation, immunisation and antibiotics. More recently, expensive health technology has been responsible for some additional gains. However, these are being undermined by the impact of the current rise in lifestyle related disease. Obesity, lack of physical activity and the use of tobacco and alcohol can lead to heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, respiratory disease and many other serious health problems. As a result, people in Australia are likely to experience significantly more disability as they age.**

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's 2008 edition of *Australia's health*,¹ reports that while about 84% of the population rate their health as good or excellent:

- 2.5 million adults in Australia are obese; a further 4.9 million are overweight
- 50% of men and women are not sufficiently physically active
- one in 6 people aged 14 years and over smoke daily
- 10.3% of men and women drink alcohol at levels that put them at increased risk of long term harm; ~20% drink on a monthly basis at levels that put them at increased risk of short term harm.¹

Too many people in Australia suffer from chronic preventable illnesses

Despite recent advances in treatment of chronic preventable illnesses including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and osteoporosis:

- cardiovascular disease accounts for 35% of deaths in Australia and is one of the leading causes of disability affecting 1.4 million Australians
- approximately 900 000 people over 25 years of age have diabetes; yet half are undiagnosed and are unknowingly developing life threatening complications, including chronic kidney disease
- one in 3 men and one in 4 women will be directly affected by cancer before the age of 75 years; yet many do not avail themselves of the evidence based recommended screening tests for cancer
- almost 600 000 people have osteoporosis, a major cause of pain, disability and hospitalisation; yet most are undiagnosed and untreated.¹

The benefits of prevention and early detection of chronic disease are well known. However, too few Australians undertake the recommended screening tests for the risk factors for serious conditions.¹

GPs are ideally placed to effect preventive care

About 85% of people in Australia see a general practitioner at least once per year.^{1,2} General practice is ideally placed to incorporate brief evidence based preventive health care and health promotion actions into consultations and thereby improve the health of Australians.

There are certainly challenges to providing preventive care in general practice; these include adequate time and remuneration. However, many GPs see preventive care as a core component of their work. The addition of skilled nurses to general practice teams can only strengthen this focus.

Practising prevention

There are many helpful resources to assist GPs provide evidence based lifestyle advice and screening tests. These include:

- *Guidelines for preventive activities in general practice* (the 'red book')³

Figure 1. Patient fact sheet: A wellness check can save your life

You don't have to feel sick to be sick. Many preventable serious illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, kidney disease, cancers and osteoporosis can be missed until they are well advanced and can then lead to early death or years of suffering. On the other hand, if you address your risks or detect disease early, you are much more likely to be cured. National expert guidelines recommend the following simple screening tests for every Australian.

What age?	Which test?	How often?
From age 13 years	Skin checks for those with high risk skin	Annually
From age 18 years	+ waist measurement	Every 2 years
	+ body mass index (BMI)	Every 2 years
	+ blood pressure	Every 2 years
	+ chlamydia	Annually for those at risk
	+ mental health (including risk for depression and suicide)	Every visit as appropriate
From age 20 years	+ Pap test in sexually active women	Every 2 years until age 70 years
From age 45 years	+ cholesterol level	Every 5 years
	+ osteoporosis risk assessment in women	Annually; bone densitometry should be discussed with your GP
From age 50 years	+ blood pressure more frequently	Every 6 months
	+ urine protein test	Annually
	+ bowel screen (test of faeces for blood)	Every 2 years
	+ prostate risk assessment in men	Annually; risks/benefits of prostate screening should be discussed with your GP
	+ osteoporosis risk assessment in men	Annually; bone densitometry should be discussed with your GP
	+ mammogram in women	Every 2 years; optional in women aged 40–49 years and over 70 years
	+ vision test	Every 5 years
From age 55 years	+ fasting sugar (blood glucose)	Every 3 years
From age 65 years	+ vision and hearing tests	Annually

If you are above your healthy weight, have an unhealthy lifestyle related to poor nutrition, inactivity, smoking or excessive alcohol intake; or a medical or family history of particular diseases; or if you are of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Chinese or Indian background, some of these tests are recommended at much younger ages and at more frequent intervals. Ask your GP about a wellness check

Source: Rowe L, Kidd MR. Save your life and the lives of those you love: your GP's 6 step guide to staying healthy longer. Allen and Unwin, 2007

- *Putting prevention into practice: guidelines for the implementation of prevention in the general practice setting* (the 'green book')⁴
- *SNAP: a population health guide to behavioural risk factors in general practice*⁵
- The Australian GP Network Lifescripts resource library on adult and child health checks⁶
- disease specific national guidelines, and
- *Australian Family Physician* articles on smoking,⁷ nutrition,⁸ alcohol⁹ and physical activity.¹⁰

The challenge is to present this complex information in a format that both GPs and their patients can easily access during routine consultations.

People in Australia need easy access to concise consumer health information on how to prevent common diseases including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, kidney disease, cancers, lung disease, osteoporosis, dementia and depression.¹¹ *Figure 1* is a patient fact sheet summarising health screening tests recommended by national expert committees at particular ages and for those people with particular health risks. These health screening tests are based on the evidence based *Guidelines for preventive activities in general practice* by The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners.³ This simple reminder may be one solution to overcoming barriers to preventive health care in general practice.

The 'wellness check'

The burden of chronic disease in Australia will change if every person over the age of 18 years takes part in a regular preventive health assessment based on expert evidence based guidelines (*Figure 1*). We need to make having a 'wellness check' at your local general practice easier for all adults in Australia.

Conflict of interest: none declared.

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