

WOMEN'S HEALTH SCREENING

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Introduction

A common refrain we hear from women patients is that it is troublesome to be a woman. There is a whole spectrum of medical conditions that are unique to women. These include cystitis, vaginal discharge, menstrual irregularities and breast lumps, benign and otherwise. Women are also largely responsible for contraception, and have to bear the brunt of failed contraception. With the onset of menopause, there are a whole host of symptoms which can be troublesome to some. Then there is the silent menace of osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is usually asymptomatic until a fall occurs, resulting in morbidity and mortality.

Cancers

In the prime of her life, a woman has to contend with breast and gynaecological cancers. In 2003, Hong Kong pop star Anita Mui, died from cervical cancer. She was at the peak of her career, and was only 40 years old. Recently, one of the Breast Screen Singapore Ambassadors, Actress Koh Cheng Mun was diagnosed to have breast cancer. The knowledge that someone near and dear, or someone prominent has cancer often triggers individuals to go for screening tests.

Amongst all the screening tests done for cancers, mammography and Pap smear fulfil many of the WHO recommendations for a screening test¹. Breast and cervical cancers are public health problems of importance. The natural histories of these diseases are well understood. There is a recognizable latent or early symptomatic stage. Mammography and Pap smear are suitable and acceptable screening tests. There are accepted treatments and useful interventions for patients with the diseases. There are good facilities available in Singapore for diagnosis and treatment. The cost of case-finding is affordable. In Singapore, with clear guidelines from the Ministry of Health, case-finding is a continuing process. More women are becoming aware of the need for regular screening, and more doctors are recommending screening to women at risk.

STI and HIV Risks

HIV is no longer a disease confined to the homosexual man, or the promiscuous individual. To quote Senior Minister of State for Health Dr Balaji Sadasivan, "Marriage and the women's own fidelity are not enough to protect them against HIV infection. Most have been infected despite staying faithful to their partners." Recent rulings have resulted in

the Ministry of Health tracing and informing wives of HIV-infected men, even without their consent. HIV testing has also been made routine in pregnancy, unless a woman opts out of the test.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is asymptomatic until a fracture occurs. After menopause, a woman's bone mineral density rapidly declines. Although bone mineral density measurements are necessary to diagnose osteoporosis, it has not shown to be cost-effective to screen the BMD of the entire population. The Osteoporosis Self-assessment Tool for Asians (OSTA) is a useful tool to select which post-menopausal woman needs to have BMD measurements done².

Hypertension, Diabetes mellitus, Hyperlipidemia, and Elevated BMI

With increasing age, the risk of hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and hyperlipidemia increases. These risk factors carry with them the microvascular and macrovascular atherosclerotic risks to target organs and peripheral vascular disease. Overweight and obesity is an indicator that the patient may have one or more of the risk factors. Hence, health screening of women should not overlook these risk factors. The screening intervals are described in further detail in MOH clinical practice guidelines on health screening.³

Risky behaviours

Use of alcohol and smoking are risky behaviours that require counseling of the consequences. The risk of more than one sexual partner has been described under STI and HIV risks.

Conclusion

As Family Physicians, it is good practice to perform opportunistic screening in women for breast and cervical cancers. Screening for osteoporosis should be done for high-risk individuals. HIV testing is a more sensitive issue. However, women who present with other sexually transmitted infections should be encouraged to screen for HIV as well. Screening for hypertension, diabetes mellitus, hyperlipidemia, elevated BMI, and risky behaviours may uncover health risks amenable to counseling and lifestyle modification.

REFERENCES

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