

# Taking Charge of Your Health

*Titbits...on women's health*

The Vancouver Women's Health Collective continues to hear from women in the community who are unable to get the routine care they need. We are committed to speaking out against attacks on our public health care system and at the same time, we support women to advocate for themselves to get the services they need. We believe that women are experts in their own health, and that we can work towards providing all women with information and skills to navigate the system.

Health care cuts affect women directly: in BC, for instance, the Medical Services Plan (MSP) no longer covers annual physical examinations. This barrier to prevention compromises women's health. Additionally, the trend toward privatization of health care (a two-tier system, as it is sometimes referred to), fails to address issues of poverty, discrimination, and class-privilege.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2003, 30% of women in Canada aged 50-69 did not have a mammogram within the recommended previous two year period. 13.5% of women aged 18-69 had never had a PAP smear test. These figures reflect the impact of a health care system that does not adequately reach women.

The BC health care system provides a provincial health care insurance plan for its residents called the Medical Services Plan (MSP). In recent years MSP premiums have increased by 50%, and at the same time, services to individuals have been cut dramatically. This plan determines what kind of access you have to health care, including tests and exams. See the VWHC titbit on MSP for more information.

Many of the recommended tests for women in various stages of life are not automatically covered by MSP. MSP gives doctors a lot of control by letting them determine whether or not a test or exam is "medically necessary," and you may not agree with their decision. If you disagree with your doctor, or feel that your doctor is not meeting your needs, SPEAK UP, or find a new doctor.

**Please copy and distribute freely to women you know and work with.**

The Vancouver Women's Health Collective's *Titbits* are not intended to endorse or recommend particular treatments, explanations or products but rather to facilitate your own search for health resources. Please see your health practitioner for more information.





## ROUTINE TESTS AND EXAMS

**MSP doesn't cover an annual physical exam, but you can ask your doctor to perform these tests when you visit her/him:**

- Record height, weight, heart rate, blood pressure, pulse, temperature
- Listen to heart and lungs using a stethoscope
- Check eyes, nose, ears, throat, skin and nails
- Feel back, abdomen, neck, groin and armpits
- Test reflexes by tapping the knee with a light-weight hammer
- Collect a urine sample to test for infection, diabetes and other problems
- Provide a requisition for blood testing (to test for things like anemia or cholesterol)
- Test for chlamydia (urine test or vaginal swab), gonorrhea (vaginal swab), HIV or syphilis (blood test), if you are sexually active

## MONITOR YOUR HEALTH

In addition to advocating for better health care for women in a publicly-funded health care system, it is essential that we actively monitor our health over time, in order to work towards good health.

**Ways to monitor your health and practice preventative care:**

- Keep a record of your health, including symptoms, prescriptions taken, and doctor's visits.
- Learn how to do a breast self-exam and make sure you do it once a month.
- Take advantage of public screenings for skin cancer in your community.
- Practice safer sex.
- Learn about your health concerns, including therapies available, non-invasive treatments, and complementary treatments. Look for resources at the library, online, and at information centres like the VWHC (we have health files on many health topics). Try and distinguish between credible information sources and advertisements supported by pharmaceutical companies.
- Trust your own knowledge of your body.
- Get a second opinion from a doctor if you don't agree or have concerns about the care you are getting from a doctor.
- Be active in your health care promotion. Join a support group, join the VWHC, or join a community centre.

**Vancouver Women's Health Collective**

Website: [www.womenshealthcollective.bc.ca](http://www.womenshealthcollective.bc.ca)

## ROUTINE TESTS AND EXAMS

**Routine tests and exams, starting at age 18, that should be performed annually:**

Annual Physical Exam	Only covered by MSP if your doctor thinks it is medically necessary
Pelvic Exam and PAP test (cervical exam)	Covered by MSP
Clinical Breast Exam	Covered by MSP
Dental exam and cleaning	Not covered by MSP
Chlamydia test	Covered by MSP

**Tests and exams recommended for different stages of a woman's life:**

Prenatal care during pregnancy	Covered by MSP
Baseline cholesterol testing (at age 30, retest every 1-5 years)	Covered by MSP, if your doctor thinks it is medically necessary
Baseline test for thyroid hormones and function (age 35, retest annually after 50)	Covered by MSP, if your doctor thinks it is medically necessary
Mammogram (every 1-2 years beginning at age 40, or earlier if you find a lump, or are at a high risk of breast cancer)	Covered by MSP; before age 40 with a doctor's referral, after age 40 without
Bone mineral density scan (at age 50, then every 2-4 years)	Covered by MSP, if your doctor thinks it is medically necessary
Colonoscopy (at age 50)	Covered by MSP, if your doctor thinks it is medically necessary
Stool sample (at age 50, then every 5-10 years)	Covered by MSP, if your doctor thinks it is medically necessary
Eye Exam (at age 50, then every 1-4 years)	Not covered by MSP for people between the ages of 18-65

\*\*\*some of these tests should be performed more often if a woman is considered high risk\*\*\*

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## RESOURCES

Check out these resources at the VWHC:

- We have a library containing many resources on women's health issues
- We have health files with information on health-related topics, local support groups and resource centres, and media coverage of women's health issues
- We have an up-to-date directory of doctors and specialists accepting new patients, with evaluations of doctors by women from the community, for you to use
- We have workshops on patient's rights, menopause, depression and body image

### Websites worth visiting:

The Canadian Women's Health Network	<a href="http://www.cwhn.ca">www.cwhn.ca</a>
Women's Health Matters	<a href="http://www.womenshealthmatters.ca">www.womenshealthmatters.ca</a>
BC Women's Hospital	<a href="http://www.bcwomensfoundation.org/hospital2.html">www.bcwomensfoundation.org/hospital2.html</a>

### Resources in the community:

Sexually Transmitted Disease Clinic and Resource Centre 655 West 12th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V5Z 4R4	604-660-6161
Screening Mammography Program of BC 8th Floor- 686 West Broadway, Vancouver, BC V5Z 1G1	604-877-6200
South Community Health Centre 6405 Knight Street, Vancouver, BC V5P 2V9	604-321-6151

### Sources used in putting together this Titbit, and available for you to use at the VWHC library:

*Our Bodies, Ourselves for the New Century.* The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1998.

*Women in Canada: A gender-based statistical report.* Statistics Canada, 2005.

*The Complete Natural Medicine Guide to Women's Health.* Sat Dharam Kaur et al., 2005.

*The Harvard Guide to Women's Health.* Karen J. Carlson et al., 1996.



**Vancouver Women's Health Collective**

#225-119 W. Pender St., Vancouver, BC V6B 1S5

Phone: 604-736-5262 E-mail: [vwhc@vcn.bc.ca](mailto:vwhc@vcn.bc.ca)

Website: [www.womenshealthcollective.bc.ca](http://www.womenshealthcollective.bc.ca)

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