

SO YOU WANT TO SAVE YOUR LIFE?

Britain is one of the few countries in the world with an established screening programme for the major cancers and cardiovascular conditions. Many of these screening programmes are available free under the National Health Service.

Although you would expect that people would be rushing to take advantage of this free provision, the reality is different.

The table below indicates the uptake of the cancer screening programmes offered under the NHS and the uptake of each.

| Type of cancer | Percentage uptake |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Cervical screening | 78.9% |
| Breast screening | 73.9% |
| Bowel cancer screening | 63.7 |

For all types of screening programmes, the uptake is lower in the ethnic communities due to a combination of factors.

Whilst it is recognised that all screening tests do cause some physical discomfort, emotional anxiety and have their intrinsic limitations, in the vast majority, the advantages of the tests outweigh the small disadvantages.

NHS Screening Services- available free to those eligible

1. Cervical screening programme

In 2008, there were 2,828 new cases of cervical cancer diagnosed, and 957 deaths from this condition. The peak rate remains highest in women aged 30 to 39 and in the over 70 age group.

The cervical screening test is offered to all women between the ages of 25 and 64 (in England) and these women are invited every three to five years to have the test depending on their age. This test involves taking a sample of the tissue from the cervix (neck of the womb) and sending it to a laboratory for an analysis.

2. Breast cancer screening

Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in the UK and in 2008 there were over 48,000 new cases diagnosed (99% in women, less than 1% in men) and, sadly, there were over 12,000 deaths related to breast cancer.

The NHS offers a free breast cancer screening programme involving an investigation called the mammogram, which is essentially an x-ray of the breast. This is offered to all women over the age of 50 and is currently being extended to include women between the ages of 47 and 73. The test is offered every three years.

3. Bowel cancer (colorectal cancer)

There are approximately 110 new cases of bowel cancer diagnosed every day in the UK alone. It is the third most common cancer after breast and lung cancer. In 2008, there were approximately 40,000 new cases diagnosed, of which two-thirds affected the colon and one-third the rectum. The incidence of developing cancer increases with age and is greater in males than in females. It is estimated that the lifetime risk of developing bowel cancer in men is one in fourteen and in women one in nineteen.

In England, men and women between the ages of 60 and 69 years are invited for bowel cancer screen every two years. The test involves sending a small sample of faeces (stool) for a biochemical test. Those who are tested positive are then invited for a further investigation called colonoscopy. A colonoscopy is essentially a procedure which allows direct inspection of the inside of the bowel.

4. Cardiovascular Screening

Each year in the UK alone, 124,000 people suffer a heart attack and 152,000 people suffer a stroke. Cardiovascular disease (heart attack and stroke) remains one of the main causes of death in people under the age of 75 in the UK.

The NHS vascular screening programme was launched in 2008 and the availability of this formal programme varies from area to area. However, patients attending the GP will be offered a basic screening programme which will include checking the height and weight to determine the body mass index (BMI), checking the blood pressure and referring for tests such as blood glucose and cholesterol levels. In addition, and equally important, is the advice offered on lifestyle which includes dietary changes, weight loss, exercise and smoking cessation.

Screening services in the private sector (non NHS sector)

The NHS screening services are offered to those who are deemed to be at a higher risk and at prescribed frequencies. However, many individuals who do not necessarily fall into these categories may still be genuinely concerned about their individual health and the risks of developing these conditions.

In my particular practice, I have increasingly been consulted by younger people who may not be in a statistically higher risk group but are concerned due to a

strong family history of a particular condition, or where their modern lifestyle places them at a higher risk.

There is a wider range of screening services available in the private sector. These screening programmes range from the basic well-person checks, similar to the NHS checks, to the comprehensive cardiac and cancer screening programmes. Some screening programmes also incorporate genetic screening tests to identify individuals at a higher risk of developing certain inherited conditions.

1. Cardiovascular screening

Recommended screening tests for cardiovascular conditions include:

- Exercise ECG (stress test). The exercise ECG helps to identify areas of impaired circulation to the heart, thus helping to screen for silent heart disease.
- Carotid Doppler scan. This is an ultrasound scan of the carotid arteries in the neck. This is a completely non-invasive test which helps to determine the state of the vessels supplying the brain. It is recognised that any changes in the arteries in this area will reflect changes in the major arteries elsewhere in the body.
- Coronary artery CT scan. This is a useful test to measure the presence of calcium deposits in the vessels supplying the heart. It is recognised that a high calcium score is associated with an increased risk of plaque deposition within the arteries, ie narrowing of the arteries.

- CT coronary angiogram. This is a useful test which allows non-invasive imaging of the coronary vessels and helps to identify areas of narrowing of vessels supplying the heart.

2. Cancer Screening

All the cancer screening services described above under NHS services are also available in the private sector, but the services are offered to a much wider age group and additionally include:

- Ultrasound scan or mammogram for detecting lumps in the breast.
- Cervical screening test.
- Pelvic ultrasound scan, especially to determine pathology in the ovary i.e. cancer of the ovaries. There are limitations to screening for ovarian cancer and more refined tests are still being developed.

This review of screening services has focussed on services available in the mainstream health sector. Increasingly, community organisations and places of worship are also engaged in promoting health education and screening services, bringing the service closer to the individual and in an environment where he or she feel more comfortable.

With such a large choice of screening services available, can you really afford to take a chance?

After all, a simple test may save your life!

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Useful links:

Evaluation of the UK Colorectal Cancer Screening pilot:
<http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/bowel/finalreport.pdf>

Cancer Research UK: www.cancerresearchuk.org

The British Heart Foundation: www.bhf.org.uk

The Stroke Association www.stroke.org.uk