



WHAT MAY SURPRISE YOU ABOUT

# preventive care

Immunizations, cancer screenings, lifestyle counseling, and other wellness measures can save lives. But your doctor may be falling short when it comes to making sure you're up-to-date on the services you need.

In a study published in January 2012 in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, researchers analyzed nearly 500 visits to 64 family-practice and internal-medicine physicians in Michigan. On average, the patients, who were 50 to 80 years old, were due for five to six preventive services but typically received only three.

Doctors missed the chance to do two-thirds of immunizations that were due, more than half of counseling services, and more than a quarter of screening tests. Most often missed were flu shots, counseling about aspirin to prevent heart attacks, and vision screening.

Eight of 10 patients who qualified for those services didn't get them.

Doctors devoted less than 3 percent of the time during visits for acute or chronic illnesses to discussing exercise or nutrition, and less than 5 percent to providing preventive-care procedures, according to a 2003 study that tracked 138 physicians in 84 practices in Ohio.

At the same time, doctors frequently waste time on preventive tests or screenings that aren't helpful. Many of these have been described in the *Choosing Wisely*<sup>®</sup> campaign. The time spent on unnecessary tests cuts into time that could be spent on effective preventive care.

## There are several reasons basic prevention doesn't get the attention it should.

### Among them:

- » **IT DOESN'T PAY.** Doctors make more money treating problems than preventing them. A study published in 2011 found that the Medicare program, for instance, paid doctors fully for coordinating and doing only one of the 15 preventive services that the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force considers necessary for people 65 and older.
- » **IT'S AWKWARD TERRITORY.** Doctors often don't feel comfortable or confident counseling patients about prevention, possibly because they don't receive much training in it. In a survey that focused on the 2008–2009 academic year, for instance, less than a third of medical schools met the minimum 25 hours of nutrition training recommended by the National Academy of Sciences.
- » **DOCTORS DON'T HAVE THE TIME.** Even the best-trained ones would be hard-pressed to squeeze all the preventive services now recommended into a typical office visit. Add to that the fact that doctors tend to see patients when they're sick, not well.

## Assuming an active role is key to getting the preventive services you need and avoiding excessive or potentially harmful ones you don't.

### These steps can help.

- 1 **FIND A PRIMARY-CARE DOCTOR WHO CAN COORDINATE YOUR WELLNESS CARE.** And make sure you trust and feel comfortable communicating with him or her. Both are essential for getting personalized advice, encouragement, and follow-up. Ask your doctor for help designing a wellness plan that includes diet, exercise, and, if needed, weight goals.
- 2 **KEEP GOOD RECORDS.** Some doctors give patients online access to a personalized health record, and some research suggests that keeping track this way helps people stay up-to-date on preventive care.
- 3 **SCHEDULE VISITS SPECIFICALLY FOR PREVENTION.** A wellness visit every year or two gives you and your primary-care doctor the opportunity to focus on assessing your overall health and risk factors for preventable disease and to offer preventive services tailored to your age, gender, and disease risk factors.
- 4 **BE PREPARED.** The average patient gets 10 to 20 minutes of face time with the doctor at an appointment, according to physician surveys and direct studies. Deciding in advance which things you need to discuss can make the most of your limited time. Don't hesitate to bring a written list so you remember what issues to raise. And consider bringing a relative or friend with you to the appointment.
- 5 **THINK OUTSIDE THE OFFICE.** Given the time constraints of most doctor's appointments, some practices have begun shifting toward newer, more holistic care models—including "patient-centered medical homes" and "wellness portals"—in which each patient has a team of providers who stay in contact with them via e-mail, phone calls, or classes on nutrition, weight loss, or other topics. Office visits are supplemented with materials that the patient can use at home. Even if your doctor doesn't offer such a model, it's possible that you can use email to ask follow-up questions or to address problems that arise between visits. And you can request referrals for preventive services that your doctor doesn't offer, such as to a registered dietitian for help with a meal plan. Some health insurance plans cover such visits.