

10 Questions You Should Ask Your Doctor

Because chances are she won't ask you

by Kara Wahlgren

The average person gets less than 20 minutes with her doc—which means your M.D. probably doesn't delve into the latest medical breakthroughs or discuss in detail any of your not-so-obvious symptoms. Once you get past the chitchat, you've got about five minutes left for your checkup. So, if you think something might be wrong with you, don't wait for her to guess what (or where) it might be. Take charge of your health and get the advice you need.

1 DOES THIS MOLE LOOK OK?

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT Your doctor may be the one with the degree, but *you're* the one who sees your skin 24/7. You're way more likely to notice a new mole or a freckle that's gone funny, especially if it's hidden somewhere under your robe. More than 1.5 million Americans will be diagnosed with skin cancer this year, and melanoma is the most common cancer among women ages 25 to 29. "Your skin is the largest organ of your body, and an internist should check it out annually," says Kimbra A. Bell, M.D., an internist with Northwestern Memorial Physicians Group at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in

Chicago. "But you know your body best, so it's always important to ask your doctor if you notice something strange." Not sure what's weird and what's normal? Check your mole against the self-examination page at skincancer.org.

HOW TO ASK "I've noticed this freckle/beauty mark/mole changing. Is it something I should see a dermatologist about? Is there anyone you would recommend?"

2 IS MY BIRTH CONTROL STILL RIGHT FOR ME?

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT If it isn't broke, don't fix it, right? Not

necessarily. "If you're having any negative symptoms, like nausea, headache or breakthrough bleeding, talk to your doctor," says Dr. Bell. Even if you're not having side effects, what worked for you in your teens—or even last month—might not be the best choice right now.

If your overall health or lifestyle has changed in the last few years, traditional hormonal birth control methods, such as the Pill or a patch, may not work well for you anymore. According to a recent study, weight gain may reduce the effectiveness of your hormonal birth control. In this study, the pregnancy risk for women using hormonal methods went up 70 percent for those weighing more than 165 pounds, and almost doubled for women weighing more than 190 pounds. Also, if you smoke, the risk of developing a blood clot increases while using hormonal birth control. And if you get nasty PMS, extended-cycle pills, such as Seasonale, could help make your life easier. Not to mention that if you simply tend to forget

to take your pill, you may want to switch to a lower-maintenance option, such as the ring or a patch.

HOW TO ASK "I've been on the same Pill for a while, but lately I've been having trouble with X. Is there something that might work better for me?"

3 DO I LOOK FAT?
WHY IT'S IMPORTANT "Obesity is an epidemic," says Dr. Bell. In fact, about 60 percent of American women are overweight. "It's important to know where you really stand with your weight, because being heavy is definitely a risk factor for many different kinds of diseases, including breast cancer, heart disease and diabetes." But it may be up to you to pose the \$64,000 question—some doctors won't tackle this touchy subject unless the patient brings it up first. According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study, only 42 percent of obese patients say their doctors advised them to lose weight.

HOW TO ASK "Am I overweight, and if so, what can I do about it? What is my ideal weight to maintain good health?"

4 MY PERIOD STOPPED COMING. WHY?
WHY IT'S IMPORTANT Infrequent or irregular periods can be caused by dieting, exercise, stress or (hello!) pregnancy. But they can also be a sign of polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), a condition that affects 5 to 10 percent of women of childbearing age. During a normal cycle, an egg develops within a cyst inside the ovary, which ruptures when the egg is mature. In women with PCOS, the eggs only partially develop, so cysts fail to break open and accumulate in the ovary, and ovulation doesn't occur. This can cause irregular periods and difficulties getting pregnant. Other symptoms include excess body hair, acne, pelvic pain, type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. There is no cure, but PCOS can be managed. Talk to your doctor—she can see if PCOS

is causing your wayward cycle by testing your hormone levels and running an ultrasound.

HOW TO ASK "I haven't had a period in a while. I don't think I'm pregnant. Do you think I should be tested for PCOS?"

5 AM I ALLERGIC TO...?
WHY IT'S IMPORTANT More than 50 million people in the U.S. deal with allergies every year, which can lead to bigger problems such as chronic sinus infections. Even if you've never had seasonal allergies before, you can still be affected—the most common age for developing allergies is 19, although they can kick in at any age. But there's no need to suffer through another sneezing fit. An allergy test called ImmunoCAP can check for a number of allergens at once using a single blood sample. "Once your doctor knows what's causing your symptoms, they can usually be easily controlled," Dr. Bell says. "There are prescription medications that can help, such as Zyrtec or Allegra. People with really severe allergies may need to get allergy shots."

HOW TO ASK "Every time the weather changes, my sinuses go crazy. Could I

be suffering from allergies, and what should I do about them?"

6 WHAT DO YOU THINK OF MY DIET?
WHY IT'S IMPORTANT Before you give up carbs or jump on the South Beach bandwagon, talk to your doctor. Diets are never one-size-fits-all, and she can help you figure out which one will work best for you. "Are you a healthy young woman? Do you have diabetes? Do you have hypertension? High cholesterol?" Dr. Bell asks. "All of these things are important. Your doctor might want to make modifications to the fat content or the carbohydrate content to better suit your overall health." She can also tell you whether you'll be getting the right nutrients or refer you to a dietitian who can help you set up a plan you'll be able to stick to.

HOW TO ASK "I'm thinking of starting Atkins/South Beach/Weight Watchers. What's your opinion of that diet? Is there something else you'd recommend?" ➤

Get More Time with Your Doc

GO EARLY "Doctors tend to be running on schedule in the morning, so being the first or second patient is probably better than going at 2 P.M.," says Kimbra A. Bell, M.D.

MAKE A LIST... When you're sitting in the doctor's office, it's easy to forget that you wanted to ask about that low-carb diet or weird cramp you get when you exercise. Write down your biggest questions so you remember to ask them.

...BUT BE SELECTIVE "Physicians don't want to rush through problems just to make it through a long list," says Dr. Bell. "Choose your top two or three questions to ask during your appointment, and schedule a follow-up if you have more to discuss."



7 SHOULD I BE TESTED FOR DIABETES?

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT An estimated 65 million

women in the U.S. are overweight or obese, putting them at a higher risk for diabetes, and 6 million women have pre-diabetes, a higher-than-normal blood sugar level that can lead to diabetes and heart problems. Unfortunately, the symptoms can disguise themselves as minor problems like urinary tract infections or fatigue. If you're having any unexplained symptoms—or if you're carrying a few extra pounds—ask your doc if you're at risk for diabetes. Catching signs early can prevent the onset of the disease. "Everybody should ask, whether it's in your family history or not," says Dr. Bell. She also recommends getting a fasting blood sugar test, which checks glucose levels after eight to 10 hours of fasting, every year or two. If your level is too high, you may be at risk.

HOW TO ASK "I've never had my blood sugar checked. Should I schedule a test?"

8 HOW MUCH EXERCISE DO I REALLY NEED?

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT We all need exercise, no matter what.

"A lot of patients think that because they're 5' 4" and 100 pounds, they can eat whatever they want and not exercise," says Dr. Bell. But just because you're thin and feel healthy now doesn't mean your inactivity won't catch up with you eventually. Everyone should try to exercise five days a week, and it's recommended that at least four of those days include 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise, she adds. It strengthens your heart and increases blood flow to your brain and intestines, which improves alertness and digestion.

HOW TO ASK "This is my current exercise program. Am I doing

enough? Is there a certain type of exercise that would be particularly good for me and my body type?"

9 DO I NEED A BOOSTER SHOT?

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT If you think booster shots are just for third-graders and Third World travelers, think again. "The main adult vaccination is DPT—diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus," says Dr. Bell, and you need one every 10 years. But most likely, it's up to you to remember when you're due. If you've switched physicians, which most of us have, your current doctor may not have your last shot on record.

HOW TO ASK "I haven't had a DPT booster since high school. Should I get one today?" Then ask if you can get a lollipop when it's over.

10 HOW CAN I HAVE A HEALTHY PREGNANCY?

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Your health—before and during pregnancy—can have an impact on your baby's well-being. New studies have found that your diet while pregnant can affect your baby's risk of developing cancer or asthma, and that calcium may cut your risk for preeclampsia, a dangerous rise in blood pressure during pregnancy. So if your maternal instinct is kicking in, ask your doctor what you need to do *now*. Will your current birth control delay your ability to become fertile? Should you pop prenatal vitamins? Is it a good idea to stay away from mercury-laden fish? What else should you be eating? Are you getting enough exercise? Do you need any immunizations? Should you be tested for any genetic disorders? Your doc has all the answers.

HOW TO ASK "I'm thinking of getting pregnant in the next few months or year. What should I be doing now to help things go smoothly?"