

# “Making Healthcare Work” Woman’s Healthcare

Producer: Paul Felice  
Writer: Don McGee

Theme music up briefly, and then under

Don: Hello and welcome to another edition of “Making Healthcare Work. “ This is Don McGee. In this edition, we’ll be discussing women’s healthcare and the importance of health screening. Joining me today is the Medical Director for Health Affairs, and Utilization Management at Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey, Dr. Sharol Lewis. Dr. Lewis, welcome to the program.

Dr. Lewis: Thank you, Don. I’m glad to be here.

Don: Also on the show today is Mary Cassidy. Mary is an advanced practice nurse and Manager, Preventive Health in the company’s Quality Management and Clinical Innovations department. Thanks for joining us today, Mary.

Mary: It’s my pleasure, Don.

Don: Dr. Lewis, what do women need to know about maintaining good health?

Dr. Lewis: Well, Don, these days, many women find themselves busier than ever. The demands on their time seem endless. Whether married, single, young, old, black, white, rich or poor, it seems as though women have more responsibilities than ever. And, they’re constantly being tugged in different directions. And, did I

mention motherhood? That's why the first thing women need to do is make time for themselves to monitor and manage their health.

Don: Sounds like you've just given women another item to add to their long list of duties, Doctor.

Dr. Lewis: You're right, Don. But, women need to make monitoring and managing their health their top priority.

Don: Mary, one way of maintaining good health is through screening for diseases. Perhaps we should start with a simple definition. What is "screening" and why is it so important?

Mary: Well, screening means looking for early signs of a disease in healthy people – people who aren't showing any symptoms of illness. Screening doesn't prevent disease, but it allows us to identify individuals at increased risk of developing a disease. And, it allows health care professionals to find diseases at their earliest and most treatable stage. This is the reason why screening is so important. No matter what the situation – from heart disease to cancer and everything in between – early diagnosis increases the odds of a positive outcome.

Don: Dr. Lewis, when should women begin screening?

Dr. Lewis: Well, according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, all women should have a general health evaluation, a complete physical, once a year. And that evaluation should include screening for cancer - to detect the signs of pre-malignant or malignant conditions.

When to begin screening for cancer varies with the disease. For example: When it comes to breast cancer, the American Cancer Society recommends women should have their breasts examined by a doctor once every three years starting at age 20. And, they should begin to perform a monthly self-examination at the same age. The American Cancer Society also recommends having a baseline mammogram at age 35. Future exams are then compared to this baseline – which is a starting point. Thereafter, annual breast cancer screenings should begin at age 40.

Mary: And, that's just breast cancer. It's recommended that screening for cervical cancer should start 3 years after becoming sexually active, but no later than age 21 for all women and should take place once a year after that.

Dr. Lewis: Don, we should also point out that the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists does not recommend routine screening for ovarian cancer in women who are asymptomatic or who are at low risk for the disease.

Don: “Asymptomatic.” Could you just give me a brief definition of what that means?

Dr. Lewis: It means that you don’t have any symptoms that make you concerned that anything is wrong.

Don: Well, here’s a problem: It’s got to be impossible for women to keep all of this straight. Certainly, there’s no way anyone could remember at what age to begin screening for every potential disease, correct?

Dr. Lewis: Sure. That’s why women have to, at minimum, get an annual physical exam. Annual physicals are the perfect time for women to ask their doctors about recommended screenings, particularly given their individual and family health history. The bottom line is: Screenings are essential. And, every woman needs to be proactive in this regard.

Mary: And, remember screening means seeing your doctor before symptoms appear. You should see your doctor or other primary health care provider such as advanced practice nurse, nurse practitioner or physician's assistant, when you're healthy, and not showing symptoms of a disease. Think "prevention."

Dr. Lewis: Good advice. Here are some statistics that should motivate women to be screened: Every three minutes a woman in the United States is diagnosed with breast cancer. Every two minutes around the world, a woman dies from cervical cancer. But, if this were found early, both of these cancers can be treated.

Don: Dr. that reminds me to remind our listeners that the topics we're discussing today could help a lot of women. Please keep in mind that it's easy to forward this link to this podcast to a friend.

Dr. Lewis: That would be a great thing to do. It could save her life.

Don: Okay, so to summarize what we've discussed so far: Women need to make time to take care of themselves and their health; screening is essential to that goal, and, screening means being examined when you're healthy.

Mary: And, women should visit their doctor or primary health care provider annually.

Don: I see. *(To the audience)* You're listening to "Making Healthcare Work," and our topic today is Women's Health. My guests from Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey are Mary Cassidy, Manager of Preventive Health, and Dr. Sharol Lewis, Medical Director, Health Affairs and Utilization Management.

Dr. Lewis, when a woman discovers she has a medical problem, what should she do next?

Dr. Lewis: Your personal physician is always a good place to start. He or she can discuss with you your risk factors for disease. And, your doctor can recommend the best screening routine for you to follow. Of course, there's the internet, which can be a great source of information.

Don: But, not all sources, not all sites, on the internet are reliable. Do you have any favorite sites for women?

Dr. Lewis: Yes, I like these three: The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists' website at [www.ACOG.org](http://www.ACOG.org); The American Cancer Society site at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org); and, finally, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention site at [www.CDC.gov](http://www.CDC.gov).

Don: I'm sure those web sites will be helpful. What about your own website at Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey? Is there information there that women can use?

Mary: Absolutely, Don. Our members can simply go to [www.horizonblue.com](http://www.horizonblue.com) and gain access to a great deal of information powered by WebMD. A good place to start is the "Health and Wellness" tab on our home page. There's information available about many preventable conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

Don: Mary, Wellness Programs can be helpful. Perhaps you could explain to our listeners what they are.

Mary: Sure. Wellness Programs are designed to help women and their families make lifestyle changes that result in improved health and well-being. Today, many employers encourage participation in Wellness Programs that promote



simple lifestyle changes like proper diet, exercise, and rest - things all women need.

Don: Dr. Lewis, what types of physical activities are recommended for women?

Dr. Lewis: Well, of course, each individual should discuss exercise with her doctor, but the basics are still the best – walking, stretching - simple exercises that get you moving and get your heart pumping. These can do wonders. Of course, you have to start any exercise routine slowly, and you should talk to your doctor before you begin. But, once you know what type and how much activity you can handle, it's important that you keep at it. Exercise has to be part of a woman's daily routine.

Don: Dr. Lewis, you mentioned the heart, and it's widely known that heart disease remains the number one killer of women in America. What can women do to prevent heart disease?

Dr. Lewis: Well, Don, there are ways women can promote a healthy heart. First: eat well. Eat more fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Avoid junk food and trans fats. Second: Start an exercise program and stick to it. Third: try to reduce stress. And, of course, don't smoke.

Don: We're running out of time and we haven't even gotten to things like how to take care of yourself when you're pregnant, or the recently FDA-approved vaccine that guards against cervical cancer.

Dr. Lewis: In terms of the vaccine, although the FDA has approved it, it's effective only against certain strains of the virus that can lead to cervical cancer. I'm not saying one should or shouldn't be vaccinated –that's a decision to be made in consultation with your doctor – but the story takes us right back to where we began: women still need to get annual pap smears.

Don: Mary, how about a brief summary of maintaining health when one is pregnant?

Mary: Early and regular prenatal care is essential. This may include updating a woman's immunizations in an effort to protect both mother and baby. Of course, when you're pregnant, eating well is more important than ever. Fresh fruits and vegetables are a good start. Fortified cereals that contain iron, calcium and folic acid are good, too.

Don: How about things to avoid when you're pregnant?

Mary: Alcohol, caffeine, certain prescription and over the counter medications, even some foods. And, of course, nicotine and so-called recreational drugs, but these should be avoided at all times.

Don: Well, Mary, Dr. Lewis, we're going to have to leave it there. A final thought?

Mary: Women: Take control of your health!

Dr. Lewis: And get screened!

Don: There you have it. My guests today were Dr. Sharol Lewis, Medical Director for Health Affairs, and Utilization Management at Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey, and Mary Cassidy, Advanced Practice Nurse, Manager, Preventive Health - Quality Management and Clinical Innovations. Again, a reminder: Please forward the link to this podcast to a friend. It could help save a life. Please join us next time on "Making Healthcare Work." This is Don McGee.