

# 10 Common Barriers & Tips to Cancer Screening

Cancer screening is a way to look for cancer early, before any signs or symptoms have started. When cancer is found early, it is often more treatable with better health outcomes.

Missed screenings are often due to a range of challenges or concerns that make screening difficult or overwhelming. You may face barriers or have concerns that may stop you from scheduling a routine screening exam. These challenges can result in cancers diagnosed more often or at later stages.

Most of us know and understand the benefits of routine cancer screenings. If you are behind on your routine screenings, you are not alone.



**7<sup>in</sup> 10**

U.S. adults are behind on at least one of their routine screenings.<sup>1</sup>

This tip sheet will help you overcome some of the common challenges that may hold you back from screening. Whether fear, financial concerns, stigma, availability, or awareness is keeping you from screening, this tip sheet is for you. Learn practical steps you can take to help overcome concerns related to screening.



To learn more about screening, prevention, and early detection, visit [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Early-Detection](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Early-Detection)

# 1

## UNDERSTANDING CANCER SCREENING OPTIONS AND TIMING

Keeping track of which cancer screenings are recommended for you can be difficult. Each cancer has its own guidelines for when screening is recommended. Also, there are now more screening options than ever before. Each test or procedure has different timing, preparation steps, benefits, and risks. Use this table as a quick reminder for when screening is recommended for some cancers.

### Recommended Screening Guidelines for People at Average Risk\*

	Colorectal Cancer	Breast Cancer	Lung Cancer	Cervical Cancer	Prostate Cancer
When	Depends on screening method, stool-based tests: 1–3 years, direct visualization tests: 5–10 years	Every 2 years <sup>†</sup>	Every year	Pap test every 3 years, or HPV test every 5 years, or both tests together every 5 years	Depends on screening method; talk to your doctor about how often you should be screened based on your personal risk
Who	Adults aged 45–75 years old	Women aged 40+ years old	Adults aged 50–80 with a 20-pack/year-smoking history	Adults with a cervix aged 21–65	People with prostates between the ages of 55–69
How	Stool-based tests or direct visualization tests	Screening mammogram or 3D imaging	Low-dose CT (LDCT) scan of the chest	Pap test or self-collection	Prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test

\*This is not a complete list. There may be other recommended tests depending on your personal and family history and other factors. Talk to your care team about if additional screening for cancer is right for you. You can also ask them about self-exams you can perform at home in between appointments.

<sup>†</sup>This table is based on recommendations from the [United States Preventive Services Task Force \(USPSTF\)](#). Your doctor may refer to screening guidelines from other national professional organizations as well. Recommendations for cancer screening may change over time as new tests become available and cancer rates change. If you have questions, talk with your doctor about your personal risk and the right screening schedule for you.

If several people in your family have had cancer, especially at a young age (under 50) or rare types of cancer, talk with your doctor. They may suggest seeing a genetics specialist to find out if you should have different or earlier cancer screenings.



# 2

## ADDRESSING YOUR EMOTIONS

It is normal to feel anxious and fearful before, during, and after the cancer screening process. This is called **“scanxiety.”** You may feel nervous about a procedure or scans, especially if it is your first time. The fear of receiving a cancer diagnosis may stop people from screening altogether. There also may be misunderstandings or misconceptions about screening.

If you have a higher risk or family history of cancer, you may feel many emotions in the days and weeks leading up to your appointment. These feelings can become more intense while you are waiting for your test results.



Bring a list of your questions about the screening method to your doctor’s appointment to help you feel better and know what to expect.



Find an appointment time that works best for you, whether that’s in the morning, afternoon, or another time that feels easier. You can also decide who to bring with you for support. Making these choices can help you feel calmer and more in control.



Use breathing techniques and mindfulness activities during the procedure or scan to help yourself relax.



Talk to your doctor about if anti-anxiety medications can help you manage the screening process.



Try different activities to distract yourself when feeling scanxiety. Take a walk, watch your favorite movie, or listen to your favorite song.

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It may be helpful to make annual screenings part of a routine. You can schedule your screening during your birth month, as a gift to yourself. Or try and schedule during a time of year that has fewer commitments.”

*Shannon Brown, MSW, LISW-CP,  
CSC Helpline Manager  
and Lead Navigator*



# 3

## NAVIGATING BUSY SCHEDULES

Even though it can feel inconvenient, making time for cancer screening is important. Between work, school, caregiving, and daily responsibilities, putting off screening is understandable. Making time for screening now can help protect your health and ultimately save you time down the line.



Taking time for a screening often means arranging child or dependent care, which can be costly and hard to coordinate. Ask your doctor if your children can come with you to your appointment.



If you are scheduling around work or school, ask if early morning, evening, or weekend appointments are available. If an appointment conflicts with your schedule, you can also ask your doctor for a note to excuse you from work or school.



Getting an appointment with your doctor can be difficult. You may need to schedule months in advance. Try scheduling your next visit before leaving your appointment, and add it to your calendar so you can plan ahead.



# 4

## MANAGING FINANCIAL CONCERNS

The cost of screening services or not having health insurance can be a barrier for completing routine screenings. The good news is that most recommended screenings are covered by most insurance plans.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) requires most health insurance plans to cover the cost of routine cancer screenings recommended by the USPSTF. This means you can get preventive services without having to pay the cost yourself (out-of-pocket). Some states have laws that apply to coverage of additional procedures for high-risk people or as follow-up to an abnormal finding.

People with no health insurance tend to screen for cancer less often than those with insurance. If you are uninsured, it is important to know that you still have options when it comes to no cost or low-cost cancer screenings.

- Ask your doctor if they know about any supportive services or assistance programs that you may qualify for.
- Look out for events in your community that may offer free or low-cost screenings. Local hospitals, clinics, churches, and workplaces may occasionally offer these affordable screening events.
- Research national programs that offer free or low-cost screenings for people without health insurance, like through the **CDC webpage**.
- Consider joining a clinical trial for cancer screening or prevention. These studies test new ways to find cancer early. Participating in a clinical trial can also be one way to access screening options at little or no cost.



For more information on health insurance coverage for cancer screenings, visit [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/blog/Will-My-Insurance-Cover-Cancer-Screenings](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/blog/Will-My-Insurance-Cover-Cancer-Screenings)

# 5

## ACCESS TO CARE

Long distances to clinics, limited access to trusted providers, transportation, and long wait times for appointments can make screening more difficult.

- Learn about at-home screening options available for you. Some new screening tests can be sent back and forth in the mail. You can screen for cancer without having to leave your home. Currently, at-home screening options are available for colorectal and cervical cancer.
- Before, after, and between screenings, connect with digital communities for health education. Advocacy organizations, like CSC, provide accessible virtual education for patients and caregivers. Social media channels, online webinars, and webpages are great resources to help bridge access barriers.



# 6

## SEEKING INCLUSIVE CARE

Cancer screening can feel challenging due to language barriers, cultural or religious beliefs, or past experiences with healthcare. These feelings are common and understandable. In some cultures, illnesses like cancer may carry stigma or be hard to talk about. You deserve care that feels respectful, safe, and supportive. It is important to find a care team that listens to your concerns and respects your values.

- When searching for a new doctor, look for clinicians and staff who understand your background and chosen language. If you do not feel heard by your doctor or feel your cultural boundaries are not respected, you have the right to seek care elsewhere.
- Ask your doctor if they have resources with images to help explain screening procedures and guidelines.
- Consider using AI (artificial intelligence) or online translation tools to translate health education resources into your chosen language.
- Look for advocacy groups who have compiled lists of facilities that offer inclusive and welcoming care for people from specific groups.



# 7

## SURVEILLANCE AND SCREENING FOR CANCER SURVIVORS

Cancer survivors are encouraged to do regular surveillance (monitoring for cancer that comes back). They should also continue regular routine screenings for other primary cancers. It is important to make a care plan with your doctor to monitor for recurrence or any other primary or secondary cancers. Secondary cancer is when a cancer spreads to a different part of the body.

- Certain treatments — including chemotherapy, immunotherapy, and exposure to radiation — may increase your risk of developing cancer. Work with your care team to make a surveillance plan that addresses your personal risk based on your cancer and your treatment history.



Your oncologist should be walking you through your specific cancer screenings. They should be managing the screening related to your cancer type.

For example, if you had breast cancer, your oncologist should be managing your surveillance for breast.

But, when it comes to other cancer types, your primary care provider should be helping to manage those regular screenings that are required.”

*Allison Steinberg, MSN, MPH  
Nurse Oncologist*

# 8

## SCREENING FOR CAREGIVERS

When caregiving for a loved one experiencing cancer, it can feel like your thoughts are taken up by stress and responsibilities. The health of your loved one is important, and so is your health. This includes making sure you are keeping up with your recommended cancer screenings as best you can.

- Talk with your doctor about your family history and your loved one’s diagnosis. They can help you understand whether your risk for cancer is higher and whether you need to adjust your screening schedule.
- Schedule your screening visits during your loved one’s appointments, or ask another loved one to take over your caregiving while you attend your screening appointment.

# 9

## SCREENING FOR PEOPLE WITH INHERITED CANCER RISK

**Previvors** are people living with an inherited genetic change who have never been diagnosed with cancer.

People with **inherited mutations** may delay or avoid screening for different reasons. They may experience increased anxiety and stress around screenings. They often may need more frequent screening and follow-up doctor visits. Cost, insurance coverage, or limited access to specialists can also make screening harder.

- It can be difficult to understand how your personal genetic changes affect your cancer risk and screening schedule. Work with your care team and genetic experts to create a screening plan that is specific to you.
- Openly communicate with your family about inherited cancer risk. It is important to share your genetic test results with your family, so they can assess their risk of cancer and make the personal decision to seek testing.



For people with a known inherited mutation, the risks vary by gene. The other factors that affect risk in average-risk people can also affect risk in high-risk people. That's why it is so important to speak with a trained professional in risk assessment — and also someone who has training in communicating your risk in a way that helps support shared decision-making. Oftentimes, that's a genetic nurse, a genetic counselor, or a geneticist."

*Sue Friedman, Patient Advocate, Executive Director and founder of FORCE: Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered*



# 10

## CHANGING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT CANCER SCREENING

Sharing your cancer screening experience can make a real difference. When people talk openly about cancer screening, it helps raise education and awareness and reduces stigma in the community. Being open about your screening experience may help ease someone's worries or help them find the strength to take the next steps for their health.

Some families or communities prefer not to talk about their health. They may be more private about cancer and hesitant to talk about screenings. They may have stigmas, or negative beliefs, about cancer topics.

No one with a cancer diagnosis should feel ashamed, questioned, or unfairly judged. Seek informed support by talking openly with your care team and connecting with others you trust who can offer understanding.



Here are examples of things you can do to help reduce the stigma around cancer screening:



Share your screening story on social media. Consider posting a picture of your experience or using targeted hashtags to share your screening updates on social media. Tag CSC when sharing your screening posts — together, our voices can encourage more people to learn about cancer screening.



Encourage your friends, family, and coworkers to get their recommended screenings. Word of mouth can be a powerful way to share health information. Hearing about screening from someone you know and trust can ease worries, reduce fear, and make taking the first step feel more manageable.



Delaying or avoiding cancer screening can happen for many understandable reasons. If screening feels hard right now, know that others share these feelings, and you don't have to navigate them by yourself.

Organizations, like CSC, the organizations listed on this tip sheet, and your care team are here to support you as you navigate your screening options. It is important to remember that the goal of screening is to find cancer early, when it is easier to treat and health outcomes are best. Screening for cancer is one way to protect your health. Talk to your care team about finding screening options that work for you and make screening feel more manageable.



## **CANCER SCREENING RESOURCES**

**Screening, Prevention, and Early Detection – Cancer Support Community**  
CSC-867-5309 (or outside the U.S., toll-free 888-793-9355)  
[www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Routine-Screening](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Routine-Screening)

**FORCE: Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered**  
[www.FacingOurRisk.org](http://www.FacingOurRisk.org)

**Brem Foundation to Defeat Breast Cancer**  
[www.BremFoundation.org](http://www.BremFoundation.org)  
+1 (202) 505-1104

**Prevent Cancer Foundation**  
[www.PreventCancer.org](http://www.PreventCancer.org)  
[www.PreventCancer.org/news/US-Adults-Are-Still-Behind-On-Routine-Cancer-Screenings](http://www.PreventCancer.org/news/US-Adults-Are-Still-Behind-On-Routine-Cancer-Screenings)<sup>1</sup>

**American Cancer Society**  
[www.Cancer.org/Screening](http://www.Cancer.org/Screening)  
800-227-2345

**United States Preventive Services Task Force**  
[www.USPreventiveServicesTaskForce.org/USPSTF](http://www.USPreventiveServicesTaskForce.org/USPSTF)

**Centers for Disease Control (CDC)**  
[www.CDC.gov/Breast-Cervical-Cancer-Screening](http://www.CDC.gov/Breast-Cervical-Cancer-Screening)

**The Cancer Network**  
[www.Cancer-Network.org/Cancer-Treatment-Screening-Providers](http://www.Cancer-Network.org/Cancer-Treatment-Screening-Providers)



## Cancer Support Community Resources

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**Cancer Support Helpline®** — Have questions, concerns or looking for resources? Call CSC's toll-free Cancer Support Helpline (CSC-876-5309 or outside the U.S., toll-free 888-793-9355), available in 200 languages.

**Open to Options®** — Preparing for your next appointment? Our trained specialists can help you create a list of questions to share with your doctor. Make an appointment by calling 888-793-9355 or by contacting your local CSC or Gilda's Club.

**Frankly Speaking about Cancer®** — Trusted information for cancer patients and their loved ones is available through publications, online, and in-person programs.

**Services at Local CSCs and Gilda's Clubs** — With the help of over 200 locations, in 50 markets, CSC and Gilda's Club partners provide services free of charge to people impacted by cancer. Attend support groups, educational sessions, wellness programs, and more:

[www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Find-Location-Near-You](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Find-Location-Near-You)

**Cancer Experience Registry®** — Help others by sharing your cancer patient or cancer caregiver experience via survey at [www.CancerExperienceRegistry.org](http://www.CancerExperienceRegistry.org).

**MyLifeLine®** — CSC's secure, online community welcomes anyone impacted by cancer to easily connect with community to reduce stress, anxiety, and isolation. Create a personal network site and invite friends & family to follow your journey. And participate in our discussion forums any time of day to meet others like you who understand what you are experiencing. Join now at [www.MyLifeLine.org](http://www.MyLifeLine.org).

**Grassroots Network** — Make sure your voice is heard by federal and state policy makers on issues affecting cancer patients and survivors by joining our Network at [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Become-Advocate](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Become-Advocate).

This publication is available to download and print yourself at [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Routine-Screening](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Routine-Screening).

For print copies of this publication or other information about coping with cancer, visit [Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org](http://Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org).

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