

Getting Cancer Screenings When You Don't Have a Primary Care Provider



There are lots of reasons why you might not have a primary care provider (PCP). Maybe you don't have health insurance. Maybe there is a shortage of healthcare providers in your community. Or maybe you've never started seeing one.

A PCP is a medical professional who takes care of your overall health. They might be a doctor (MD or DO), nurse practitioner (NP), physician assistant (PA), or clinical nurse specialist as allowed under state law. Some people have a PCP they regularly see, but many people don't.

One thing PCPs do is schedule regular cancer screenings for you. You don't need a provider to get these screenings. But if you don't have one, you might not know about what cancer screenings you need and where to go to get them.

What are cancer screenings?

These are medical tests and procedures that help find cancer in its early stages before you have symptoms.

Three of the most common cancer screenings are:

- **Mammogram.** These are X-rays that look for breast cancer.
- **Pap test.** These tests are done during a pelvic exam and look for cervical cancer or precancer.
- **Colonoscopy.** These tests look for signs of colon cancer.

Why should you get cancer screenings?

Finding cancer early can make a big difference in the success of treatment and the chances of recovery. Why?

- **It makes treatment easier.** When cancer is found early, it is usually smaller and has not spread to other parts of the body. This makes it easier to remove and treat.
- **It leads to better outcomes.** Early detection of cancer often means that treatment will be more effective. This means a higher chance of recovery and a lower chance of the cancer coming back.
- **It makes healthcare costs lower.** Treating cancer in its early stages can be less expensive.

How can you get free or low-cost cancer screenings?

If you don't have a PCP to guide you in getting the screenings you need, you still have options. The choices below might be available in your area.

Visit a community health clinic

Community health clinics are sometimes called free clinics or public health clinics. They are places where people can get medical care for free or without health insurance. These clinics often offer cancer screenings.

To find a community health clinic near you:

- Search "community health clinic near me" online.
- Visit the Health Resources and Services Administration at findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov.
- Contact your local health department.

- Ask friends or family.
- Contact social services organizations like the United Way or Salvation Army.

Attend a health fair

Sometimes organizations host health fairs where they offer free or low-cost cancer screenings. Keep an eye out for these events in your community. You can find them in local newspapers or on social media.

Contact local hospitals

Some hospitals have special programs that offer cancer screenings for people who don't have a PCP or health insurance. Call your local hospital to see if it has any programs like this.

Reach out to cancer organizations

Organizations such as the American Cancer Society might know about resources in your area that can help you get screenings. The [National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program](#) is available to help low-income, uninsured, or underinsured women.

Talk with your health insurance provider

If you have health insurance, call customer service and see if they offer any free screenings. Medicare, Medicaid, and other health insurance providers are required by law to cover the cost of certain cancer screenings like mammograms.

Finding a PCP

If you don't have a PCP, it's a good idea to get one. They can help you with cancer screenings and any other health concerns. Ask friends, family, or your health insurance for suggestions for local PCPs. You can also call your local hospital, health department, or clinics and see which PCPs are taking new patients. If you have insurance, be sure to find out if your PCP is in-network and if you will need to pay a co-pay for office visits.

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