IS IT WORTH HAVING A HEALTH MoT?

Do private health checks help prevent serious illnesses, or are they dangerous and a waste of money? Here three Express journalists report on their own tests, while Dr Steven Laitner explains why they may not be such a good idea

THOROUGH: Amy was tested during exercise and also had an MRI scan

Picture: FRANCES LEADER

PREVENTICUM HEALTH CHECK

THE TESTEE:
Amy Vickers, 33, from London. Weight: 9st 6lb; height: 5ft 2in; body mass index: 23.8; blood pressure: 114/70.

WHAT IS IT?
Preventicum claims to offer state-of-the-art preventive medicine from its recently opened clinic in Shepherd's Bush, West London. It describes itself as a six-star hotel which "does the most in-depth body check-ups available in the UK". The brochure advises: "Early diagnosis of key individual risk factors is crucial for improved prevention of serious illness."

WHAT DO YOU GET?
From the comfort of your own private luxury room, staff take you through a slew of tests, including blood pressure, hearing and vision. You also have an exercise electrocardiogram (ECG), during which your heart is monitored while you exercise, and checks on your blood, urine and lungs, as well as a physical examination done by a doctor.

The piece de la resistance is an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan. Preventicum is the only private clinic in the UK that offers a radiation-free, full-body MRI scan as a preventative health check.

The scanner produces three-dimensional images of the interior of your body, which can reveal potential problems such as tumours, narrowing of blood vessels and heart abnormalities.

MY EXPERIENCE:
I was certainly made to feel very at home and felt I received a high calibre of care. I had about an hour with the medical director Dr Michael Clarke. First we talked about my medical history and I was then given a tailored programme of health checks.

For the investigation of my lungs, heart and blood vessels I was hooked up to 10 electrodes and asked to walk for 10 minutes on a treadmill until my heart rate hit a certain point. The consultant measured the rate and regularity of my heartbeats, which were shown on a screen, while a nurse monitored my blood pressure.

After a short rest I was ushered into the MRI room, where a huge white machine awaited, ready to engulf my whole body.

I had to be injected with a liquid metal so that my arteries would show up on the scans. The whole thing was strangely comfortable.

MY VERDICT:
I was impressed at how quickly my results arrived, especially those from the blood tests. They were biked off to a lab and arrived back in time for my final consultation with Dr Clarke.

Not only was I given a clean bill of health (all my blood tests came back showing healthy levels of cholesterol and so on), but I also got to see a 3D video of my heart beating as it pumped blood around my body.

The MRI results were amazing, showing my brain, various organs and my body's full arterial tree. I was also given a CD of them to take home with me (to show prospective husbands?). I was glad to have had the MoT, which reassured me that my health is good.

● *The full Preventicum check-up costs £2,750 but less comprehensive check-ups can be tailored to specific needs. Contact 020 7665 6900 or visit www.preventicum.co.uk*

BUPA CLASSIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT

THE TESTEE:
Tina Moran, 45, from West London. Weight: 9st 13lb; height: 5ft 4in; body mass index: 25; blood pressure: 128/80

WHAT IS IT?
The Bupa Classic Health Assessment is available through Bupa assessment centres. I attended at the King's Cross clinic in central London. "The Classic Health Assessment will provide you with an in-depth profile of your health and wellbeing," claims the company.

WHAT DO YOU GET?
A three-hour assessment compiled by means of a set of health tests, a dietary questionnaire and an hour-long consultation with a doctor. The tests offered were: blood pressure, ECG, lung function, blood and urine tests, a mammogram, cervical smear, bowel cancer test, sight and hearing tests and breast examination. The following were also assessed: height, weight, body mass index, body fat percentage, waist-to-height ratio and cardiovascular risk.

Depending on your age and sex, the following tests may be done: testicular examination, chest x-ray, thyroid function blood test (over 50s), rubella antibodies test and prostate cancer test (over 50s).

MY EXPERIENCE:
The nurse who carried out the tests talked me through what each result meant and whether there was cause for concern.

Once all the tests were completed, I was taken to the doctor's consulting room for an in-depth discussion of the results. For me, this was the most enjoyable part of the day. I rarely set foot in a doctor's surgery and I wondered how I would fill an hour talking about my general wellbeing.

Once Dr Johann Carinus started going through my results, there was an opportunity to mention all those niggly things that I would never bother telling my GP. I found it all very therapeutic and my "trivial" health worries were dealt with very sympathetically.

MY VERDICT:
My results came through in an eight-page document. Some of the figures were over my head but Bupa makes things easy to understand by colour-coding the results. Those that fall into the red band denote a potential serious health risk, those in the amber band mean caution is needed and green signifies good health. Most of my results were green or borderline amber. And I can see at a glance where I can make improvements.

I was also sent a written summary of my chat with the doctor, which again was simple to interpret. I have been advised that I should return in three years, which I would not hesitate to do.

● *The Bupa Classic Health Assessment costs £488 including mammogram. Contact 0800 616 029 or visit www.bupa.com*

NUFFIELD PROACTIVE HEALTH

THE TESTEE:
Rachel Baird, 34, from South London. Weight: 6st 12lb; height: 5ft; body mass index: 18.8; blood pressure: 100/66

WHAT IS IT?
Nuffield Proactive Health is linked to the much larger Nuffield Hospitals company and offers various health checks at venues all over England and in Glasgow. I had its top-of-the-range Executive Plus assessment.

WHAT DO YOU GET?
You spend more than two-and-a-half hours having health checks then discussing results with a doctor and a physiologist. The checks include blood and urine tests, hearing and vision, a measure of your lung health and an exercise ECG.

Women over 40 get a mammogram and a cervical smear is optional. Other possibilities are a PSA blood test for men, which may indicate the presence of prostate cancer.

After all this, you can discuss any health issues with a doctor. They then examine you. Finally, you get the results of your blood and urine tests, which the doctor talks you through. You'll also be told how fit you are relative to others of your age.

Your assessment ends with you receiving advice from the doctor and physiologist about your results and what you should do. You are sent a written assessment of all your tests.

MY EXPERIENCE:
Physiologist Rick Crawford whizzed me through what seemed like a lot of different tests, culminating in an exercise electrocardiogram. I had to pedal increasingly hard on an exercise bike while he monitored my blood pressure and a machine recorded my heart's activity. Rick introduced me to Dr Zara Quail, who chatted to me about my health and then examined me, checking my ears, eyes and reflexes and prodding my abdomen to check whether I had an enlarged liver, hernia or other sinister signs. She also checked my breasts for lumps.

All three of us discussed the results of the tests that Rick had done. He seemed to think I had a pretty healthy lifestyle but advised me to spend more time relaxing and to eat breakfast.

MY VERDICT:
I enjoyed having so much time and attention lavished on me by experts. Most of my results were reassuring and will encourage me to keep looking after myself. I also discovered that I have a "soft flow heart murmur", which Dr Quail insisted was not a problem.

What really concerns me, however, was what she said about a lump in my breast. Last year an NHS breast cancer specialist reassured me that it was nothing to worry about. But when Dr Quail examined me, she said I might want to get it looked at again. I could get it checked by an NHS doctor or she could recommend a private surgeon.

Now I am worried that perhaps the NHS specialist missed something. Has Dr Quail spotted a tumour that could kill me, or is this just an example of how private health MoTs can create unnecessary worry?

● *Cost: £525 without a mammogram; £540 with. Contact 08452 30 20 40 or visit www.healthscreening.org.uk*

THE BUDGET OPTION

THE PICTURE OF HEALTH
One of the benefits of private health MoTs is that their results can motivate you to change your habits for the better. Another way to focus your mind is to answer a well-designed questionnaire about your health.

This one, from the company Health Creation, asks 120 questions. They cover your eating and exercise habits, your stress, relationships and emotions, your spiritual health and more.

Some of the questions might seem a bit daft but you end up with a picture of your current health, showing where you are strong and where you need to work.

● *The Picture of Health costs £10 plus £1.10 postage. Call 0845 009 3366.*

Tests might be more trouble than they're worth

EXPERT'S VIEW
Dr Steven Laitner, consultant in public health medicine and Hertfordshire GP

INDISCRIMINATE use of specialist investigations such as blood tests, treadmill tests (exercise ECGs) or MRI scans in otherwise healthy individuals is a risky business. No test is perfect at revealing who has a disease or is at risk of developing one in the future.

One of the most important problems with medical tests is the risk of "false positives" – where the test says that the person has a disease when, in fact, they do not. All tests produce a certain number of false positives.

The exercise ECG (which tests for heart problems such as angina), which Amy and Rachel had, is an excellent example of this problem. If you test 1,000 people who have no symptoms of heart disease with an exercise ECG, then 120 will have a positive result (meaning they could have a problem) – that's more than one in ten.

Ninety-five of the 120 people with a positive result will actually have no heart disease at all but they will have had a lot of worry and also further invasive and risky tests.

Blood tests can also show misleading results and the more tests that are done, the more likely we are to see a false-positive result.

A full body MRI scan is very likely to produce a false positive result, because the test is so sensitive it will show up any minor "lump or bump" in the body. For example, tiny nodules in the lung and cysts in the liver, kidney or ovary are very common but generally of no health consequence at all.

In fact, if scanned, half of all people aged over 50 will have one or more harmless cysts in their kidneys. The problem then is that to prove that a kidney cyst, a lung nodule or an ovarian cyst is harmless, an invasive test, such as a needle biopsy or even an operation, is required, often at the expense of other NHS patients.

Even simple checks such as a urine dipstick test can cause problems. There is again the risk of a false positive result, in about one in 20 people, leading to worry and sometimes invasive and quite uncomfortable tests.

There is also the risk of false negative results, where the result suggests that everything is fine but the person does, in fact, have a health problem. If a urine test is used to check for diabetes it can miss most of the real cases of diabetes. In these cases a person is falsely reassured.

Carrying out the prostate cancer blood test (PSA) on healthy men has not been shown to save lives, which is why the NHS does not promote it, but we do know that after taking the test some men will have unnecessary investigations and treatment. In some cases this causes impotence or incontinence, when they would never have been troubled by their prostate if they had not had that simple blood test in the first place.

Mammography is known to save lives in women in their 50s and over (which is why the NHS has a screening programme for this age group) but when it is used for women in their 40s, it causes many false alarms and unnecessary surgery.

In fact if 1,000 women in their 40s were screened for 10 years, 250 would suffer false alarms, with most needing biopsy investigations and many having mastectomies just in case. Only in possibly one case in the 1,000 might a life have been saved from breast cancer by the mammography.

'All tests produce a certain number of false results'

Although for Amy, Tina and Rachel there were not many alarms, for many people an examination that they think will reassure them may cause major worries and lead to further unnecessary testing and even treatment.

Others may be falsely reassured by a negative result and either ignore future symptoms or feel they can continue to smoke or eat an unhealthy diet because the tests have said they are fine.

Only for a very few tests – such as cervical screening in women over 25 years of age, mammography in women aged 50 and over and bowel cancer screening in men and women aged 60 and over – are the benefits of testing healthy people considered to be worth the risks.

In all other cases it is advisable to look after your mind and body, see a doctor or nurse if you have any health concerns and spend your hard-earned money on enjoyable and healthy things, such as a cycling holiday or a health spa treat, and avoid unnecessary medical tests which may harm you and your pocket.