



Your Annual Physical and Why It's Important

No matter your age or stage of life, annual physical exams are essential to your ongoing health. Visiting your primary care provider for regular preventive care is one of the best ways to identify and treat health issues before they get worse. These visits also help you track your progress toward your health goals. Here are five reasons why annual physical exams are important and to help you learn how you can stay healthy.

Assessing your overall health

Depending on your risk factors, age, lifestyle and family history, your doctor may order a variety of blood tests and other screenings during your annual physical exam, including:

- **Blood pressure screening**, which measures the force of your blood against your arteries. A reading that is lower than 130/80 is considered normal.
- **Cholesterol screening**, which measures the amount of cholesterol in your blood. In healthy patients with no risk factors, a total cholesterol reading of lower than 200 mg/dL is considered normal. An LDL, or “bad” cholesterol, reading of 130 mg/dL or lower and a HDL, or “good” cholesterol, reading of more than 60 mg/dL is considered normal.
- **Blood glucose screening**, which measures the amount of sugar in your blood. An A1C reading of less than 5.7 percent is considered normal.
- **Osteoporosis screening**, which uses a special test called a DEXA scan to check for osteoporosis or osteopenia. It’s typically recommended for women starting at age 65 unless they have other risk factors that warrant earlier testing, and for men starting at age 70.
- **Body mass index (BMI)** calculation, which uses your height and weight to determine if you’re at a healthy weight. A BMI of 18.6 to 24.9 is considered normal.

These tests can identify underlying conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes, even if you aren’t experiencing symptoms. Your test results also enable your doctor to make recommendations for follow-up testing, as well as lifestyle, exercise or diet changes that can help you improve or maintain your health.

Updating your vaccinations

Vaccines aren't just for kids. Adults need to keep their vaccines up to date to prevent dangerous diseases, too. Your doctor will review your vaccination history and risk factors during your annual physical exam and may recommend immunizations, including:

- **Tdap vaccine:** The Tdap vaccine is a combination vaccine for tetanus, diphtheria and acellular (contains no cells) pertussis, or “whooping cough,” and requires a booster for adults. Pregnant women should get a Tdap vaccine with every pregnancy to protect their newborn.
- **Flu vaccine:** Flu shots are recommended each year for most people age 6 months and older. They typically are administered before the start of the flu season.
- **HPV vaccine:** The HPV vaccine protects against cancers caused by human papillomavirus. The recommendation for HPV vaccination for girls and boys ages 11 to 12 hasn't changed in recent years. However, the Centers for Disease Control now recommends catch-up HPV vaccination for all women and men up to age 26. In addition, it's also noted that adults ages 27 to 45 who haven't previously or adequately received the vaccine, might benefit from catch-up vaccination.
- **Pneumonia vaccine:** If you have asthma or are a smoker or are older than age 65, your doctor may recommend the pneumonia vaccine to prevent lung infections.
- **Shingles vaccine:** The shingles vaccine is recommended for most adults age 60 and older.
- **Hepatitis B vaccine:** If you have diabetes or another condition that affects your immune system, work in the healthcare field or live in a group environment such as a nursing home, your doctor may recommend the hepatitis B vaccine.

Screening for cancer

Keeping up with routine cancer screenings can increase your chances of detecting cancer in the earliest stages, when it's most treatable. Your doctor will consider your age and risk factors during your annual physical exam and may recommend cancer screenings including those for skin cancer, breast cancer, gynecological cancer like cervical cancer, colon cancer, prostate cancer or lung cancer.

Since cancer screening recommendations are always being evaluated and updated, it's best to talk with your doctor about what's best for you.

Updating your medical records

A lot can change in a year, so it's important to keep your medical records up to date. Your annual physical exam is the perfect time to let your primary care physician know about any changes that could affect your health, including:

- **Medication changes:** Provide current prescription medications, vitamins, supplements or over-the-counter medications you're taking and up-to-date dosage information.
- **Allergies:** Because food, environmental and medication allergies can sometimes cause dangerous reactions, it's important to tell your doctor if you think you've developed a new allergy.
- **Social history:** Your doctor will ask you some questions about your lifestyle, including smoking habits, alcohol intake and sexual activity. To make sure you're staying safe, your doctor also may ask questions about wearing your seatbelt, screen for domestic violence and conduct a fall risk assessment if you are older than age 65. Your primary care physician also may ask if you've established an advance directive or spoken to your family about your healthcare wishes in the event that you become seriously ill and are unable to make decisions for yourself.
- **Mental health:** Your doctor may ask if you're experiencing symptoms of common mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety. If you have concerns about your mental health, your doctor may refer you to a specialist.
- **Family history:** Your doctor will ask if anyone in your family has developed any new health conditions. If your family history puts you at risk of developing a similar medical condition, your doctor may recommend earlier screening.

Establishing a relationship with your doctor

Your primary care practitioner is your healthcare partner, and an annual physical exam is a great way to get to know your doctor—and allow your doctor to get to know you. Although you may see your primary care practitioner at other times during the year for minor illnesses and injuries, those “sick care” visits usually are focused on treating a specific problem.

During your annual physical exam, the focus is on your overall wellness and the preventive care you need to stay healthy. In addition to learning more about you and your lifestyle, your doctor will allow plenty of time to address any concerns or answer questions you may have about medications, treatment plans or other health issues.

Scheduling your annual physical exam just might be the best thing you do for your health this year.