

Your Wellness Exam

For most people, annual physicals have been replaced by periodic wellness exams based on age and general health. While it may be tempting to think of these visits as optional, they provide a unique opportunity for exchanging vital information with your doctor.

A physical exam gives your doctor a basis for comparison as your physical condition changes with age – and it gives you the chance to ask questions and build a relationship with your doctor.

During your checkup, you should expect both conversational probing and physical screenings for various conditions, as well as more general tests for body mass index (BMI) and to spot hearing loss or visual impairment.

Together, these screenings represent a shift in focus from early diagnosis to prevention.¹ Your doctor wants to identify high-risk behaviors to help you maintain wellness and avoid more serious health problems. As part of this goal, he or she may also administer tetanus-diphtheria, influenza and pneumococcal immunizations.²

And if your family history or recent symptoms send up any red flags, your doctor may recommend additional testing.

What to expect

Most doctors spend a good portion of the wellness appointment counseling patients about ways to improve their health. After taking a thorough history and asking about any specific problems, the doctor generally will discuss:²

- Your dietary habits and how to improve them
- The amount of physical activity you should be getting
- Any stress in your life or symptoms of depression
- Tobacco, alcohol and recreational drug use
- Safety precautions like seat belt use and helmet use for cyclists
- Your sexual habits and any risks they pose
- How to protect yourself from the sun
- The need for regular eye exams
- Any medications you are taking
- Recommended screening tests and immunizations for your age, and risk factors for disease

Recommended screenings follow a flexible schedule, which can change depending on your health and family history. Here are some recommendations from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force.^{3,4}

General Recommendations

Screening	How Often?
Blood pressure	At least every two years for adults 18 and older
Cholesterol	Regular screenings beginning at age 35 for men and 45 for women – or younger if you have risk factors like diabetes, high blood pressure, family history of heart disease or you're a smoker
Skin Exam	Self-exams at least annually; talk to your doctor about screening, particularly if you're fair-skinned or spend a lot of time outside
Diabetes	Regular tests if you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol; talk to your doctor about other risk factors

Women

Screening	How Often?
Mammogram	Every one to two years for women 40 and older, with or without a breast exam
Pap test	Every one to three years if you are sexually active and between the ages of 21 and 70
Osteoporosis	Screen routinely starting at age 65, or starting at age 60 for women with risk factors (like a small frame or weight of 154 pounds or less)
Chlamydia	Routine screening for all sexually active women age 25 and younger; talk to your doctor about screenings for other sexually transmitted diseases

Men

Screening	How Often?
Colorectal cancer	Starting at age 50; talk to your doctor about the right test for you
Sexually transmitted diseases	Talk to your doctor about how often
Abdominal aortic aneurysm	Once between ages the ages of 65 to 75 if you have ever smoked

Making the most out of your medical exam

Because doctor visits can be very short, it's in your best interest to come prepared. Patients who are active and involved in their own health care decisions get better results – so get involved!

You should expect your doctor to have reviewed your chart before your appointment, so he or she is aware of anything you've been treated for in the past and the medications you're taking. It's reasonable to expect your doctor to know who you are and to form some sort of relationship with you.

Before your visit, write down important information about your family and medical history – especially any information that might have changed since your last visit. Make a list of all the medications you're taking, along with specific dosage information. Also, write down any concerns you have about your health, or any new symptoms you're experiencing.²

To ensure that your doctor is on time and not rushed, make an appointment as early in the day as you can, and bring a family member or friend if you're worried you might not remember or understand the doctor's recommendations. Another person can help you remember your concerns, or ask important questions you're too distracted to think of. Also, a friend or family member can take notes so you remember when to expect test results and what your next steps are.

Your wellness visits are an important step toward maintaining your health, so do what it takes to make the most of them.

Visit anthem.com for more ways to get healthy – and stay healthy.



Sources:

- 1) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: cdc.gov/family/checkup/index.htm#prepare, "Regular Check-Ups are Important," May 2008.
- 2) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: cdc.gov/family/checkuplist/index.htm, "Check-Up Checklist: Things to Do Before Your Next Check-Up," May 2008.
- 3) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: ahrq.gov/ppip/healthymen.htm, "Screening Tests for Men: What You Need and When," February 2007.
- 4) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: ahrq.gov/ppip/healthywom.htm, "Screening Tests for Women: What You Need and When," February 2007.

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