



## Your Wellness Exam

For most people, annual physicals have been replaced by periodic wellness exams. You may have these annually or more or less frequently, depending on your 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. Studies have shown that attention to a patient's medical history is more beneficial than a complete inspection of each body part.<sup>(1,2,3,4)</sup> Your check-up these days may be more conversational probing than medical poking and prodding, but the screenings your doctor orders are still important.

Although wellness visits usually include screenings for various conditions, the focus has shifted from early diagnosis to prevention.<sup>(1)</sup> This approach is less expensive and certainly healthier. Studies on smoking cessation and alcohol use have suggested that even brief counseling sessions with family doctors about the effects of problem behaviors and the benefits of making healthier choices are instrumental in people making positive changes. In the alcohol consumption study, men who'd had just two 15-minute counseling sessions with their family doctor showed nearly a 15 percent reduction in their alcohol consumption, and women demonstrated a 31 percent reduction.<sup>(1)</sup>

### 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:

- 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.<sup>(1)</sup>

Recommended screenings follow a flexible schedule, which can change depending on your health and family history. Here are some of the recommendations:

## General Recommendations<sup>(1,3)</sup>

Screening	How Often?
Blood pressure	At least every two years for adults 18 and older.
Cholesterol	Every five years starting at age 20; more often if you have risk factors like diabetes.
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	Every three years starting at age 45; earlier and more often for those with risk factors (overweight, racial minority, family history or high blood pressure).

## Women

Screening	How Often?
Mammogram	Every one to two years for women 40 and older, with or without a breast exam.
Pap test	Within three years of the start of sexual activity or age 21 (whichever comes first); screening at least every two to three years.
Osteoporosis	Screen routinely starting at age 65, or starting at age 60 or younger for women with risk factors (like a small frame).
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?
Prostate cancer	Beginning at age 50, the American Cancer Society suggests a yearly digital rectal exam and prostate-specific antigen test.
Testicular cancer	Whenever you get a physical and / or if you're age 50 or older.
Sexually transmitted diseases	Talk to your doctor about how often.
Abdominal aortic aneurysm	Once between ages 65-75 if you have ever smoked.

In addition, your doctor may order other routine screenings and administer tetanus-diphtheria, influenza and pneumococcal immunizations. If you're a woman, you may have a clinical breast examination.<sup>(1)</sup> Screenings to determine body mass index (BMI) and to spot hearing loss and visual impairment may also be performed.<sup>(3)</sup> If your family history or recent symptoms send up any red flags, your doctor may recommend additional testing.

## Making the most out of your medical exam

Because most doctor visits have been whittled down to about 15 minutes,<sup>(6)</sup> it's in your best interest to come prepared. Patients who are active and involved in their own health care decisions get better results<sup>(6)</sup>, 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.<sup>(7)</sup>

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 about any concerns you have about your health, or any new symptoms you're experiencing.<sup>(6,8)</sup>

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.<sup>(6)</sup> 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.

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Sources: 1 Harvard Health Letter, What is a Good Physical Exam?, Preventive Medicine, July 1997, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1585/is\\_n9\\_v22/ai\\_19580083](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1585/is_n9_v22/ai_19580083), accessed 5/21/07 2 Healthfacts, The Annual Physical: Cherished Beliefs Often Trump Science, New Survey Finds, July 2005, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0815/is\\_7\\_30/ai\\_n14858621](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0815/is_7_30/ai_n14858621), accessed 5/21/07 3 National Public Radio Morning Edition, Annual Physicals Popular Despite Benefit Doubts, Joanne Silberner, August 2, 2005, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4781138>, accessed 5/21/07 4 HealthAtoz, The New and Improved Annual Physical, Melissa Tennen, <https://www.healthatoz.com/healthatoz/Atoz/common/standard/transform.jsp?requestURI=/healthatoz/Atoz/dc/tp/alert06142005.jsp>, accessed 5/21/07. This article was reviewed June 2006, by Stephen Colucciello, M.D., Adjunct Professor of Emergency Medicine, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and Associate Chair, Department of Emergency Medicine, Carolinas Medical Center. 5 HealthAtoz, Why Regular Screenings Are So Important, Melissa Tennen, <https://www.healthatoz.com/healthatoz/Atoz/common/standard/transform.jsp?requestURI=/healthatoz/Atoz/dc/tp/alert06142005.jsp>, accessed 5/21/07. This article was reviewed June 2006, by Stephen Colucciello, M.D., Adjunct Professor of Emergency Medicine, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and Associate Chair, Department of Emergency Medicine, Carolinas Medical Center. 6 HealthAtoz, Making the Most of Your Doctor Visits, Jill Ross, <https://www.healthatoz.com/healthatoz/Atoz/common/standard/transform.jsp?requestURI=/healthatoz/Atoz/dc/tp/alert06142005.jsp>, accessed 5/21/07. This article was reviewed June 2006, by Stephen Colucciello, M.D., Adjunct Professor of Emergency Medicine, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and Associate Chair, Department of Emergency Medicine, Carolinas Medical Center. 7 [http://www.womensheartfoundation.org/content/HeartWellness/annual\\_physical.asp](http://www.womensheartfoundation.org/content/HeartWellness/annual_physical.asp), A Woman's Annual Physical, Taking Care of Yourself...Working with Your Doctor, accessed 5/21/07 8 Gale Encyclopedia of Medicine, December 2002, Karen Ericson, R.N. Article updated 8/14/06.

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