

The Importance of an Annual Physical Exam

Annual physical exams are a vital part of a preventative illness measure taken to ensure a long and healthy life for you and your family. Parents often make certain their children receive an annual exam, however exams become increasingly important into adulthood. Nothing can replace the importance of daily exercise, maintaining a healthy weight and not smoking, but health professionals can use an annual exam to keep abreast of signs and symptoms that could lead to a serious illness.

During these exams, your doctor will ask about your family history and note your vital signs including your blood pressure, heart rate, respiration rate and temperature. According to WebMD (www.WebMD.com), these are typical exams you may experience at your annual exam:

- **General Appearance:** Your doctor gathers a large amount of information about you and your health just by watching and talking to you. How is your memory and mental quickness? Does your skin appear healthy? Can you easily stand and walk?
- **Heart Exam:** Listening to your heart with a stethoscope, a doctor might detect an irregular heartbeat, a heart murmur, or other clues to heart disease.
- **Lung Exam:** Using a stethoscope, a doctor listens for crackles, wheezes, or decreased breath sounds. These and other sounds are clues to the presence of heart or lung disease.
- **Head and Neck Exam:** Opening up and saying "ah" shows off your throat and tonsils. The quality of your teeth and gums also provides information about your overall health. Ears, nose, sinuses, eyes, lymph nodes, thyroid, and carotid arteries are also examined.
- **Abdominal Exam:** Your doctor can use a range of examination techniques including tapping your abdomen to detect liver size and presence of abdominal fluid, listening for bowel sounds with a stethoscope, and palpating for tenderness.
- **Neurological Exam:** Nerves, muscle strength, reflexes, balance, and mental state are assessed.
- **Dermatological Exam:** Skin and nail findings could indicate a dermatological problem or disease somewhere else in the body.
- **Extremities Exam:** Your doctor will look for physical and sensory changes. Pulses can be checked in your arms and legs. Examining joints can assess for abnormalities.

Male Physical Exam

An annual physical exam for men might also include:

- **Testicular exam:** A doctor can check each testicle for lumps, tenderness, or changes in size. Most men with testicular cancer notice a growth before seeing a doctor.
- **Hernia exam:** The famous "turn your head and cough" checks for a weakness in the abdominal wall between the intestines and scrotum.
- **Penis exam:** A doctor might notice evidence of sexually transmitted infections such as warts or ulcers on the penis.
- **Prostate exam:** Inserting a finger in the rectum lets a doctor feel the prostate for its size and any suspicious areas.

Female Physical Exam

A woman's annual exam might include:

- **Breast exam:** Feeling for abnormal lumps may detect breast cancer or benign breast conditions. The doctor will also check the lymph nodes in the underarm area and look for visual abnormalities of the breasts.
- **Pelvic exam:** The pelvic exam allows examination of the vulva, vagina, and cervix. Routine checks for sexually transmitted infections are often done. A Pap test can screen for cervical cancer.

Play an active role in your doctor's appointment. Make sure you speak up with any questions or concerns you have about your health, regardless of how minor they may seem. Take doctor's warnings seriously and do not hesitate to ask for more informational resources.

The easiest way to prolong life and keep healthcare costs affordable for everyone is to take measures to prevent illness whenever possible. Annual exams and a healthy lifestyle are two big preventative measures you can control.

The staff at Benefits Solutions Group contributed to this article. It is intended as information only and is not a substitute for legal advice. Benefits Solutions Group is an insurance brokerage firm located in Oak Brook, IL. Visit us at www.BSGinfo.com.

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