

Making the Most of Your Physical Exam 2008

What is a Physical Exam?

Physical Exams are performed by your medical provider (MD, NP or PA) yearly to assess your body, treat conditions, and make suggestions for healthier lifestyles.

Who can perform my Physical Exam?

MD: Traditionally, doctors are used as primary care providers.

N.P: Nurse practitioners are graduate study prepared providers that can provide most of the same care that a primary physician can provide without the supervision of a physician. Nurse Practitioners can diagnosis and treatment ailments within their scope of practice. They are also able to refer to specialist and review test results.

PA: Physician assistants are able to diagnosis and treat under the direction or supervision of a physician. In most cases, the MD must be present in the facility for a PA to practice medicine. They are an extension of the doctor and may serve as a primary provider.

Parts of a Physical Exam

Medical History Review- Tells provider all of the illnesses you've experience from childhood through adulthood

Family History Review- Tells provider the common illnesses for your family. This should span at least 3 generations if you have this information and is mostly for parents/grandparents/great-grandparents on both sides. If there are multiple family members with the same or similar ailments, the provider should know about this.

Social History- This part of the visit tells the provider about your stresses, bad habits, and potential environmental factors that can harm your health status. Be honest, if you have a habit let them know. If you are in a situation that may cause physical harm alert the provider.

Medication Review- Your provider must know all medications you are taking including the doses and the reason for the medication (some meds have multiple uses). If you are on many different medications, create a list and keep it in your wallet, or simply bring all of your medications with you. Bringing the medication is best, as the provider has the ability to look at expiration dates, potential storage problems etc. *** *also please bring all herbal remedies that you take, and all vitamins!!* Some of these have potential to interact or counteract your medications.

What is my responsibility as the patient?

Show up on time for your visit. I know there are times when you have to wait but a good physical may take up to 45 minutes and should not be rushed. Bring all questions with you on a paper. Forward any medical records before the visit. Bring a diary of everything you ate for last 3 days (especially diabetics). Write down any symptoms you've experienced in last month and ask the cause. Be prepared to have just underwear on and prepare for possible injections/bloodwork/internal exams etc.

The Actual Exam

Overall Appearance- the provider will already have a sense of your health simply by how you carry yourself.

Height/Weight and BMI- These are important and should be checked yearly. The BMI is a calculation that determines if you are ideal weight, overweight or obese. The provider uses this number to guide the patient regarding potential weight issues.

Blood Pressure- should be checked on every visit whether annual or sick visit

The provider will check the following areas for abnormality

1. Eyes- especially important if you have diabetes, glaucoma, older age or hypertension.
2. Ears, Nose, Throat
3. Neck, thyroid
4. Heart and Lungs- both heard through chest. Chest also heard from back
5. Abdomen- let provider know about your bowels if there is a problem
6. Back/spine for symmetry, pain or muscle tightness
7. Legs and feet- important for diabetics
8. Groin- lymph nodes and exams specific to gender (see below)
9. Reflexes, muscle tone/strength, sensation etc.
10. Skin Check- yes even blacks need skin checks

Labwork- most if not all physicals come with routine labwork needed. This will include a urine sample so be prepared. *Ask about fasting before labwork.*

Cholesterol/ Lipid Profile- is checked every 3-5 years until age 40(varies) and then yearly.

TSH (thyroid function)- Done yearly at discretion of provider. If you feel sluggish, have changes in menstrual period, or have an enlarged neck this may be done.

EKG- likely if you are over 40, obese, diabetic or hypertensive. Some providers include one in every physical.

Ophthalmologist- Yearly for Diabetics and High blood pressure (for years)

Podiatrist- Yearly for Diabetics .Diabetics should not use the local pedicurist for foot care, and please no scraping or cutting callous unless it is a podiatrist or other provider.

Urine for Microalbumin- every 6 months, tests protein spill for Diabetics only

Immunizations- for adults this includes the pneumovax every 5 years and the flu vaccine yearly (at discretion of provider and according to your health history).

Dentist- Every 6 months for cleaning, especially if diabetic or gingivitis.

Women's Health Checklist

Papsmear- done by age 21 or within 3 years of first sexual experience which ever comes first. Those over age 65 with no history of positive pap smear may not need further testing, ask your provider. If you had a hysterectomy you may not need a pap. Ask your provider. STD testing is generally included in GYN exams.

Breast Exam- yearly clinical breast exam for all age groups

Mammogram- Yearly beginning at age 40 (varies to situation). If there is a family history of breast cancer ask about earlier mammograms and genetic testing.

Bone Density Testing- Begin with menopause generally around Mid 40's-50's. Menopause cause decreased estrogen which is a natural bone protectant.

Colonoscopy/Sigmoidoscopy- At age 50 one of these 2 exams should be done every 5 years.

Men's Health Checklist

Testicular Exam- from age 15-30 this is important as this is the peak age group for testicular conditions, including cancer.

Prostate Exam- From age 40, this is especially important for men who have a family history of prostate cancer.

Colonoscopy/Sigmoidoscopy- At age 50 one of these 2 exams should be done every 5 years.