

The importance of annual health exams

Annual health exams are a key component of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. A person may not see the need to visit the doctor if he or she is feeling well, but not every disease or condition manifests itself in a way that men and women can detect. According to the Unity Point Clinic, nearly one-third of the 133 million Americans living with a chronic disease are unaware of the presence of their conditions. Routine physical exams can detect serious illnesses before they do much damage.

No two physical exams will be exactly alike, but many will share some general features.

Health history

A crucial element of a physical exam will include a thorough health history if the physician doesn't already have one on file. The doctor will take time to ask questions about family history of illness, health habits, any vices (smoking, drinking alcohol, etc.), exercise schedule, and diet. If there is a possible hereditary health condition running through your family, the doctor may suggest certain testing and make note of potential signs to look for in the future.

Current ailments

After discussing a patient's history, the doctor may ask if they are having any prob-

lems they cannot explain. These can include changes in eating or sleeping patterns; aches and pains; lumps or bumps and other abnormalities. Again, the presence of symptoms may be indicative of illness or physical changes, but not all diseases produce obvious symptoms.

Vital signs

A doctor will check a patient's vital signs during the physical. Areas the doctor will look at include but are not limited to:

- **Heart rate:** This measures the speed at which the heart is pumping. Normal resting heart rate values range from 60 to 100 beats per minute.

- **Blood pressure:** A blood pressure cuff (sphygmomanometer) will measure systolic and diastolic pressure. Systolic pressure measures the force with which the blood is pushing through the arteries. The diastolic blood pressure is the pressure in the arteries between beats, when the heart rests. The systolic (top number) should be below 120, while the bottom should be less than 80, according to the Mayo Clinic.

- **Respiration rate:** The doctor will measure the number of breaths taken in a minute. WebMD says between 12 and 16 breaths per minute is normal for a healthy adult. Breathing more than 20 times

per minute can suggest heart or lung problems.

- **Pulse oximetry:** Johns Hopkins School of Medicine says pulse oximetry is a test used to measure the oxygen level (oxygen saturation) of the blood. It is a measure of how well oxygen is being sent to the parts of your body furthest from your heart. Normal pulse oximeter readings usually range from 95 to 100 percent. Values under 90 percent are considered low.

Physical exam

The examination will also include physical components. The doctor will perform a visual inspection of the skin and body for any abnormalities, such as the presence of skin cancer. The physician

may feel the abdomen to check that internal organs are not distended. Females' physical examinations may include breast and pelvic exams.

Comprehensive testing

In addition to the exam at the office, the physical may include an electrocardiogram, or EKG, to check electrical activity of the heart; blood count and cholesterol checks through bloodwork; body mass index testing; X-rays or MRIs and bone-density tests.

Physical exams remain an important part of staying healthy. Consult with a doctor for more preventative maintenance tips.

Common causes of cancer that people can control

A cancer diagnosis can be shocking. After receiving such news, many people are filled with questions such as, "How did I get this disease?" That question often has no definitive answer, though physicians may be able to work with patients to determine the various factors that contributed to their cancer diagnosis.

Cancer does not discriminate. People from all walks of life are diagnosed with cancer every day. Certain contributors, such as family history of cancer, may be beyond a person's control. But the American Cancer Society notes that people can avoid some potential cancer contributors by mak-

ing healthy choices.

Tobacco

Anti-smoking campaigns have done much to impact the number of people who smoke, but tobacco remains one of the leading causes of cancer across the globe. The ACS notes that while cigarettes, cigars and pipe tobacco are made from dried tobacco leaves, in order to make smoking more flavorful and pleasant, tobacco companies add various substances. As the resulting products burn, the smoke they produce is made up of thousands of chemicals, at least 70 of which are carcinogens.

Some smokers may not give the smoke coming from their ciga-

rettes much thought, but that smoke contains chemicals such as formaldehyde, lead, arsenic, and carbon monoxide. Recognizing that the smoke from their cigarettes is sending formaldehyde into their air may lead some smokers to quit for good.

Alcohol

Alcohol consumption can raise a person's risk of getting cancer. Alcohol has been linked to cancers of the mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, and breast, among others. The ACS notes that regular, heavy alcohol use can damage the liver and cause inflammation and scarring that might increase a person's risk of developing liver cancer.

Women who consume a few alcoholic beverages may be increasing their risk of developing breast cancer, which the ACS believes might be a byproduct of alcohol's affect on estrogen levels in the body.

Evidence suggests that the ethanol found in alcohol is what increases a person's risk of developing cancer. All alcohol beverages contain ethanol, so drinkers should not assume that one type of alcohol

is safer than another.

Diet and sedentary lifestyle

According to the ACS, research has shown that poor diet coupled with a sedentary lifestyle can increase a person's risk of getting cancer. In fact, the World Cancer Research Fund estimates that roughly 20 percent of all cancer diagnoses in the United States are related to body fatness, physical inactivity, excessive alcohol con-

sumption, and/or poor nutrition. Men and women who can control their weight and maintain a healthy weight throughout their lives can reduce their risk of getting cancer as well as other conditions, including heart disease and diabetes.

Anyone can be diagnosed with cancer. But men and women who make healthy choices can greatly reduce their risk of getting this deadly disease.

"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face."



— Eleanor Roosevelt

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