



School and Sports Physicals

School Physicals

No matter what grade your child is about to enter, there is the yearly back-to-school checklist of to-dos: shopping for school supplies, filling out permission forms, and the pediatric checkup.

While it may not seem as urgent, a yearly physical exam by your family's pediatrician is an important part of your child's health care. The back-to-school season is a convenient time for putting the exam on your family's schedule.

Back to School

Back-to-school checkups are often the only visit most kids and teenagers have with their doctor every year. The annual physical gives the pediatrician a chance to give the child a thorough physical exam. It is also a good chance to address important questions, especially with teenagers, including adolescent issues of drinking, smoking, drugs, sexual activity, and depression.



Children involved in school athletic programs often receive a sports-specific exam through the school. These exams are good at screening for potential athletic health problems. But school sports physicals alone tend not to address the child's overall health. It is not a substitute for a general physical performed by your family pediatrician. Mass physicals are not as detailed or in-depth as a pediatrician's exam.

Building a Medical History

School sports exam do not get into the detailed medical history that the pediatrician knows. A continuity of regular physical exams is invaluable. Having a long-term history with a child or adolescent gives the doctor the awareness of the child's progress and development over time. This helps the doctor detect emerging problems, as well as being informed by the detail of the patient's history, such as important past illnesses or injuries the child may forget to mention on the sports physical questionnaire.

That detail includes immunization records. Most school exams will generally include a check box asking whether all vaccinations are up-to-date, requiring the parents to remember whether or not they are. The family pediatrician will have accurate records.

Total Teen Health

Adolescence is a time when vital changes are taking place. The transition years from later childhood to puberty can involve some aches and pains your child can sometimes feel. An annual exam provides the pediatrician a sense of your child's level of self-esteem and emotional balance.

The annual pediatric exam also offers the doctor time to provide wellness guidance and advice. This has become critical as the nation wrestles with the childhood obesity epidemic. In addition to monitoring heart and blood pressure and testing for diabetes, pediatricians can use this annual visit with your child to discuss diet and exercise options.

We can talk with the child and the parents about safe approaches to transitioning from little or no exercise to a sound, achievable exercise program.

Sports Physicals



Playing on a community or school sports team is a great way for teens to stay in shape and learn teamwork. That is probably why more than 38 million American children and teenagers play at least one sport.

No matter which sport your teen plays—whether it is soccer, football, baseball, track, or martial arts—there is always a risk of getting hurt. The casualties of teen sports can range from minor sprained ankles and repetitive strains, to more serious conditions like heat stroke or exercise-induced asthma. Some kids have serious allergic reactions to bees and other stinging insects found around playing fields.

To avoid getting hurt or sick on the field, court, or track, teens need to be prepared. That preparation starts with seeing a health care provider for a sports physical to make sure their bodies are ready for the season ahead.

Some states will not let young athletes start a season or play a new sport without first having a sports physical. Even if your state does not require a sports physical, it is a good idea for every teen who plays a sport to get one to make sure they are in top shape and healthy enough to safely participate.

Examining the Young Athlete

The other side of the exercise issue is the student athlete who is already involved in an exercise and training program. Overuse and overtraining injuries are huge problems. The doctor's annual exam of a young athlete should be similar to one for any other child. Your doctor will address some sports-specific issues, including injuries, nutrition, training and exercise programs, and even attitudes in the course of the exam.

Sports can improve a child's self-esteem, but they can also harm it. If there is too much pressure, if there are brewing emotional issues, if the child is involved in the sport because of parent or peer pressure—anything like this can become an issue that affects the young athlete's wellbeing.

What Is a Sports Physical?

A sports physical—also known as a pre-participation physical examination—is a check-up to assess a teen's health and fitness as it relates to a sport. It is not the same as a regular physical. During the sports physical, the health care provider looks for any diseases or injuries that could make it unsafe to participate in sports.

Where Is a Sports Physical Done?

The teen's pediatrician can perform the sports physical. Physician's assistants and nurse practitioners also can do a sports physical and sign the required forms.

Many schools also offer sports physicals. They will usually set up stations around the gym, where health care providers will perform the different medical tests.

Your child also can get his sports physical at some immediate care clinics, as well as the clinics inside some drug store chains. You do not need an appointment for these sports physicals, which usually consist of a health history and basic exam. However, sports physicals should not take the place of an annual physical exam by your teen's pediatrician.

When Is a Sports Physical Done?

Ideally you should try to have the exam done about six to eight weeks before sports season starts. That way, if the health care provider wants to treat a condition, refer you to a specialist, or do a follow-up exam, there will be enough time before the sport begins to be cleared to play.

What to Expect During a Sports Physical

Your teen's sports physical should start with a thorough medical history. The health care provider will ask about any history of illness, hospitalizations, or injuries that might prevent your teen from playing, or that might limit the amount of activity your teen can handle. Your teen may be asked to fill out a health history form.

These include:

- Asthma
- Shortness of breath or chest pain during exercise
- Dizziness or fainting spells
- High blood pressure
- Excess fatigue
- Diabetes
- Frequent headaches
- Eating disorders
- Vision problems (wearing glasses or contact lenses)
- Epilepsy
- Past surgeries or injuries (broken bones, fractures, dislocations, or concussions)
- Heart problems such as a murmur or abnormal heart rhythm
- Bone, joint, or spine injuries
- Skin problems
- Severe allergies such as to food, pollen, or stinging insects
- Liver or kidney problems
- Use of certain medications including prescription, over-the-counter, illicit, and herbal medicines

- A family history of heart problems or sudden death before age 50. The medical history will be followed by a physical exam, in which the health care provider will:
- Measure height and weight
- Take pulse rate and blood pressure
- Check the heart and lungs
- Check neurological function such as reflexes, coordination, and strength
- Test your child's vision and hearing
- Check the ears, nose, and throat
- Look at joint flexibility, mobility, spinal alignment, and posture
- Screen cholesterol, obtain a hemoglobin count, and perform a urinalysis

Girls may also be asked about their period, and whether it is regular. Additional testing such as blood tests, X-rays, or electrocardiogram may be ordered during the sports physical.

Will My Teen Be Able to Play?

At the end of the sports physical, the health care provider will decide whether it is safe for your teen to play the sport.

The health care provider's decision is based on several factors, including the:

- Type of sport and how strenuous it is
- Position played
- Level of competition
- Size of the athlete
- Use and type of protective equipment
- Ability to modify the sport to make it safer

If everything checks out during the sports physical, the health care provider will give the okay to play without any restrictions. Or the health care provider might recommend certain modifications, like using special protective equipment, carrying an epinephrine auto injector for severe insect allergies, or using an inhaler if your teen has asthma.

It is rare for teens to be barred from playing entirely. Most health conditions will not prevent kids from participating in sports, but sometimes they will need treatment and a follow-up exam in order to play. Finally, remember that even if your teen has a sports physical every season, if it is not a complete physical exam, he should still receive a comprehensive health exam each year. If your teen takes a break from sports one year, make sure they still receive an annual check-up.

For more information about this subject please check:

The Center for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/

The American Academy of Pediatrics at www.aap.org