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Annual check-up ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Shouldn't the health services give an annual comprehensive checkup for all the students? We have such checkups back in our home country. I think that it's necessary for uncovering hidden problems that the student is not aware of normally.

— International

Answer

Dear International,

You're not alone in wanting more information about when and if annual physical check-ups are needed! Many people may recall going to their health care provider throughout childhood and early adolescence and aren't sure if they need to continue as they get older. To answer your question, it's highly recommended that *all* people receive an annual physical exam — regardless of age and health status. As you allude to, people of all ages benefit from receiving an annual physical exam by establishing trust with a health care provider to possibly catch a medical condition before it becomes serious (more on the benefits later). Better yet, they're typically covered by most health insurance plans! If you're a student, you may be able to access an annual physical directly through your school's medical services. That being said, everyone is different and has unique health needs, so some people may need to visit a health care provider more frequently. Meeting with them during an annual physical exam can help determine what care you need, and how often, to keep you feeling your best.

A visit to a health care provider is often top of mind during times illness or other potential concerns (reproductive health, travel health, etc.). However, even if you're feeling okay, there are plenty of other reasons to see your health care provider (also known as a primary care provider or PCP) for at least an annual physical exam to:

- **Build trust and discuss your health care needs:** The more you work with a health care provider, the more you may get comfortable sharing information about yourself. You can also figure out if they're a good match and see if you want to work with someone else.
- **Receive lifestyle tips to improve health:** Maybe you've been wanting to get more sleep

or to quit smoking? These visits provide an opportunity to discuss how to make lifestyle changes based on your goals.

- **Screen for health complications:** Screening allows them to check for signs of illness, which might not always be visible. Catching health care issues early may lead to follow-up care to rule out certain conditions or to start treatment early to reduce complications.
- **Manage medications and vaccinations:** Health care providers can oversee all of your prescriptions and make sure that any medications, including supplements, don't have any negative interactions. They can also keep track of your vaccinations and administer any new vaccines or booster shots.
- **Get referrals to other healthcare providers:** Based on your health care needs, your health care provider can connect you to other specialists.

Adapted from [Duke Health](#). [2]

So, what can you expect during an annual check-up? Typically, the health care office will have you fill out information about yourself and medical history before your appointment. That way, they can tailor the visit to your needs. During your appointment, you can expect a review of your vital signs, which includes taking your temperature, blood pressure, heart rate (pulse), and breathing rate. After that, the health care provider will conduct a physical exam that often includes looking at parts of your body (eyes, ears, throat, etc.) and gently feeling your abdomen and back for signs of health issues. Finally, they'll likely ask about your health care history and lifestyle habits before discussing recommendations or potentially follow-up care, such as additional screenings, lifestyles changes, or referrals.

In addition to an annual physical exam, which may include referrals to specialists, other routine exams may be recommended depending on your age and health care needs:

- **Dental:** regular dental exams, which include cleaning your teeth and checking for cavities and gum disease, support overall preventive healthcare. Why? According to [Mayo Clinic](#) [3], monitoring dental health can provide valuable information about the state of both your [oral health](#) [4] and overall health, as certain conditions may cause oral changes. After the exam, the dentist will recommend how often follow-up exams are needed.
- **Obstetrician/Gynecologist (OB/GYN):** annual visits to an OB/GYN starting around age 15 is the standard of care for people with vaginas. Between ages 15 to 21, these visits focus on building trust with the health care provider and having conversations about contraception options and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), regardless of prior sexual activity. Starting at age 21, the visit generally includes a [pap smear test](#) [5], which is a screening test for cervical cancer, every three years until age 30. At age 40 or 45, the visit may include recommendations for [mammograms](#) [6] that check for breast cancer based on your health history.
- **Eye:** The [American Academy of Ophthalmology \(AAO\)](#) [7] advises that adults receive a full eye exam once in their 20s, twice in their 30s, and an eye disease screening at age 40 to check for vision changes and symptoms of disease. Those with glasses or contacts may go earlier or more frequently. Others at high risk, such as people with diabetes, high blood pressure, or a family history of eye disease, may need to go sooner. The risk for of eye disease increases with age, so it's recommended that people 65 years and over receive an exam every year or two.

Thanks for a thought-provoking question around the benefits of annual check-ups for primary health care. Regularly seeking care, even when you're feeling well, may help make sure you're getting the assistance you need for any health concerns and maintain your health as your body changes with age and over time. Also, by establishing relationships and practicing open communication, it will be that much easier to approach care when you aren't feeling so hot.

Alice!

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