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ConsumerReports[®]Health



Health checkups

When you need them—and when you don't

Like many people, you may schedule a yearly checkup or “annual physical” with your doctor. It usually includes a health history, physical exam and tests.

It is important to have a regular doctor who helps make sure you receive the medical care that is best for your individual needs. But healthy people often don't need annual physicals, and they can even do more harm than good. Here's why:

Annual physicals usually don't make you healthier.

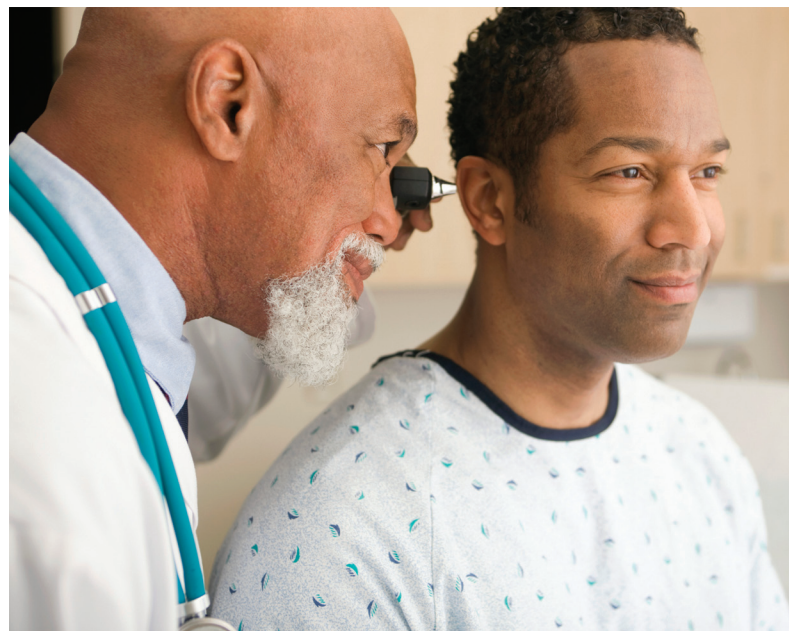
For your physical, your doctor may order tests, such as blood and urine tests, or an electrocardiogram (EKG).

Sometimes, these tests are ordered for healthy people who have no risk factors.

There have been many studies of the effects of these annual checkups. In general, they probably won't help you stay well and live longer. And usually they don't help you avoid hospital stays or keep you from dying of cancer or heart disease.

Tests and screenings can cause problems.

Most people should only have a test or screening if they have symptoms or risks factors.



One problem is getting a false-positive result. These false alarms can cause anxiety, and unnecessary follow-up tests and treatments. For example, a false-positive blood test can result in a biopsy. An EKG that is not interpreted correctly may lead to another test that exposes you to radiation. Or you might get a procedure that has a risk of heart attack or death in two patients for every 100 who get the test.

Avoid unnecessary costs.

The U.S. health care system spends \$300 million a year on unnecessary tests that are ordered in annual physicals. Billions more are spent on follow-up tests and treatments.

Set a schedule with your doctor.

When you have an exam, your doctor:

- May find conditions that need treatment.
- May find you have risk factors for a disease.
- Will advise you when to get follow-up and preventive care.

Usually your doctor can provide several kinds of care in one visit. For example, you may get a flu shot when your doctor sees you to check how your new blood pressure medicine is working.

If your doctor wants to schedule an annual physical, you can ask if it is necessary. Or ask if you can wait until you have a problem or are due for a test (such as a Pap smear or blood pressure test).

So when do adults need a checkup?

You may need a checkup:

- When you are sick.
- When you have a symptom that could mean illness.
- To manage chronic or ongoing conditions.
- To check on the effects of a new medicine.
- To help with risk factors like smoking or obesity.
- For prenatal care, if you are pregnant.
- For lifestyle issues like family planning, STD prevention and healthy eating, especially if you are a young adult.
- For other reasons that are based on your individual needs.

It is also important to see a doctor if you haven't had health care in a long time. It is best to have a trusted doctor you see regularly.

What about preventive care?

Preventive care is important. Having a regular doctor helps you get preventive care.

Everyone should get the recommended immunizations and screening tests, such as those listed in the box on the right.

Advice from Consumer Reports

Tests that can help

The recommendations below are for healthy adults. If you have risk factors or a chronic disease, you may need different tests or you may need a test more often. Ask your doctor what schedule is right for you.



Blood pressure test: Most people should have the test every one to two years.

Cervical-cancer tests: Women ages 21 to 65 should have a Pap smear and HPV test every three years. Starting at age 35, you can wait five years if both tests are done together.

Cholesterol test: Men 35 and older, and women 45 and older with heart-disease risk factors should have this test at least once every five years.

Diabetes test: People at risk for diabetes should get this test every three to five years.

Mammogram: Women ages 50 to 74 should get the test every one-to-two years. Older women and women in their 40's should talk to their doctor about their risk factors.

Colon cancer tests: People ages 50 to 75, or younger people with a family history of colon cancer, should get a colonoscopy every 10 years. Or, they should get a stool test every year, or a sigmoidoscopy every five years with a stool test every three years.

Osteoporosis test: Women 50 to 65 who have risk factors, and women over 65 should get the test. Men 65 and older should ask their doctor if the test makes sense for them.

Abdominal aortic aneurysm test: Any man age 65 to 75 who has ever smoked should have this test once. If the test result is abnormal, you may need regular testing.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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