

If I Am A Healthy Person Do I Still Have To See A Doctor?

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For many years people have accepted that an important part of maintaining one's health is to visit a healthcare provider once a year and undergo an examination. This visit usually included a physical exam, a series of blood tests, a urinalysis, a chest x-ray, and an EKG. During the visit, questions about one's health were asked and answered, family problems were discussed, and further tests and treatments were scheduled as needed.

Today it is still true that an important part of maintaining your health is to visit your medical provider at least once per year for an annual examination. Many of the standard procedures that were once part of an annual examination are no longer shown to be of value – for instance, we no longer perform a chest x-ray on a person who has no symptoms. On the other hand, many tests and procedures that we perform during an annual examination have been shown to have great value.

In addition to providing information about how your body is functioning, and detecting early warning signs of potential health problems, seeing your health provider every year helps you to establish a relationship with that provider, which is of inestimable value. Many people do not feel comfortable or cared-for in the hands of strangers when they become ill. They feel safer and better cared-for when the medical provider is someone they know and can relate to. They have learned that they can trust the information given to them by their provider, and they can work with the provider to make better decisions about their healthcare.

What tests and procedures should I have done during my annual examination?

The following tests, performed at appropriate times, can help prevent serious illness:

For everyone:

- 1. Complete physical examination – once every three years from the ages of 20 to 39, and once every year if you are over the age of 40.**

Physical exams allow your medical provider to detect early or asymptomatic (symptomless) signs of such diseases as heart murmurs, organ enlargement or organ masses.

- 2. Blood pressure measurement – once every year if you are over the age of 17.**

By measuring blood pressure, your provider can determine whether you are developing hypertension, a condition that can lead to heart attack or stroke. Treatment of hypertension can be very effective. Treatment of hypertension has resulted in a 59% reduction in stroke deaths and a 50% reduction in deaths from coronary artery disease since 1972.

- 3. Rectal exam every year if you are over age 40.**

As unpleasant as this one sounds, rectal exams can help your provider to detect early signs of colorectal cancer. For men, this exam can also help detect prostate cancer.

- 4. Fecal occult blood testing every year if you are over age 50.**

A 1993 study showed that yearly fecal occult blood testing decreased death from colorectal cancer by about one third.

- 5. Sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy every 3-5 years if you are over age 50.**

Colorectal cancer is the third leading cause of death from cancer in the United States. Of the three widely used methods of screening for colorectal cancer – digital rectal exam, fecal occult blood testing, and sigmoidoscopy – sigmoidoscopy is the most specific and

sensitive. These tests provide a more comprehensive look at your colon, and further help your provider detect signs of cancer or other gastrointestinal disease.

6. Blood sugar test every year if you are over age 20.

Diabetes is the seventh leading cause of death in the United States. Diabetes is the leading cause of blindness and non-traumatic lower extremity amputations in adults. Blood sugar screening can identify hidden and early cases of diabetes, which allows you and your provider to more effectively treat your diabetes and prevent the serious side effects of the disease.

7. Lipid profile (cholesterol screening) test every 5 years (if the initial test was negative) starting at age 20.

Coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States. High blood cholesterol is an important risk factor for coronary heart disease. By detecting high blood cholesterol early, your provider can help you prevent heart disease.

For men:

8. Prostate specific antigen (PSA) test every year if you are above age 50.

Prostate cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death in men. Early detection may help save your life and may ward off future cancer-related illness.

For women:

9. Pelvic examination and Pap smear every year over the age of 18, or younger if sexually active.

Pelvic examination is used to detect and identify cancers of the female genital tract. Pap smears are a very effective tool for identifying cervical cancers and pre-cancers.

10. Breast exam by your provider every three years if you are between the ages of 20 and 39, and every year if you are over the age of 40.

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer in women. It is the second leading cause of death from cancer in American women. You have a much better chance of survival if your breast cancer is detected in its early stage. Your provider is trained to detect visual and physical changes in your breasts and the areas around your breasts (axilla) that can lead to the early detection of breast cancer.

11. Mammogram every 2 years if you are between the ages of 40 and 49 and every year if you are over the age of 50.

Mammography is the most effective way to detect early breast cancer in women over 50 years of age.

The answer to the question in our title – **“If I Am A Healthy Person Do I Still Have To See A Doctor?”** – is “Only if you want to greatly improve your chances to continue to be a healthy person for your whole life.” Wouldn’t you rather choose to see a doctor once per year when you feel good, than have to see a doctor once per month or more when you are sick?