Quick sports physicals not enough to ensure health of teen athletes

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Parenting a teenage athlete is a juggling act—monitoring homework, keeping up with practice and training schedules, weeks packed with competitions or games. It may seem like a never-ending "to-do" list and that yearly sports physical can seem like just one more thing in a busy parent's life. But the quickest way of checking it off the list could be detrimental to a teen's health.

"Sports injuries are a small portion of what is affecting our teens' health and well-being. The sports physical required by schools and sports leagues just skims the surface and doesn't dive deep enough into the real issues that affect a teen's health," said Jerold Stirling, MD, pediatrician at Loyola University Health System and chair of the Department of Pediatrics at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine. "Some of the deeper issues such as mental health, social and emotional challenges can't be addressed in a school gym surrounded by hundreds of other kids or with a quick exam at a retail store."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly half of the 19 million cases of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) reported each year are with people between the ages of 15-24. The CDC also reports that suicide is the third-leading cause of death in the same age group. And nearly 20 percent of teens are overweight or obese. These health risks can't be addressed with a quick sports physical or in a public place.

"As children grow into their teen years, social and mental health need to

be addressed in a safe, private environment. Teens need to know they can bring their questions and concerns to someone who cares and will keep it confidential," Stirling said. "No one knows your young athlete like his or her primary-care doctor. That relationship can open a door for teens to feel comfortable asking questions about their health and overall well-being."

In addition, the American Academy of Pediatrics has released new recommendations concerning heart screenings and vaccines that aren't required for a sports physical but are integral to a teen's physical health.

"Many parents see the sports physical done in a school gym or quick clinic as the only medical attention their child needs when this isn't the case," Stirling said. "There are many issues that can't be detected in a simple physical. In fact, many young athletes don't get the care they need. It's just assumed that they are healthy because all the boxes on the sports physical have been checked off, and that can be dangerous."

Stirling also recommends parents schedule an appointment with their child's primary-care physician well before the season begins.

"If parents wait too long and we do find a problem, we won't have time to address it. By bringing a young athlete in early enough before the season begins, if we do find something, we can work on treatments and therapies to resolve the issue so the child won't miss any time on the field," Stirling said.

To make the most out of the appointment, Stirling suggested parents and teens fill out the required forms together honestly. Parents also should emphasize the confidentiality of a doctor's visit and how this is an opportunity to talk about all health concerns.

"How a teen is doing in school, his or her career goals, relationships with

parents and peers - as a pediatrician, these are all things that I care about in my patients," Stirling said. "You won't find these on a form, but they really are an integral part of what makes a person healthy."

Provided by Loyola University Health System