

Periodic check-ups key to baby boomer health and longevity

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For some baby boomers, getting ready for a routine visit with their doctor is like training for a marathon. Some patients want to be in the best shape possible before stepping on that scale and getting those lab

results. Others are so anxious about their vital stats being below par that they consider postponing or even canceling their examinations, doctors report.

According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), the term "[baby boomers](#)" refers to the 71 million people born between 1946 and 1964. The first boomers began hitting age 65 at the rate of 10,000 per day in 2011.

Now finding themselves in the age range between 53 and 71 years old, even the most youth-oriented boomers have to admit they are not getting any younger. It has been noted in a [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevent report](#) and [Time](#) magazine article that boomers are living longer but aren't necessarily living healthier lives.

In recent years, a lively debate over the pros and cons of the annual physical exam for boomers and others have appeared in major medical journals. Opinions have been mixed, noted recent [USA Today](#) and [New York Times](#) articles, with many medical groups taking no official stand.

"An inflexible rule mandating an annual physical exam was debunked more than two decades ago," says Dr. Patrick Dowling, professor and chair of UCLA's Department of Medicine. "What a boomer does need, especially those turning 65, is one complete history and physical, followed by Medicare's annual wellness visit to screen for specific problems based on symptoms, chronic conditions and risks. During this visit the medical provider should provide personalized health advice and stress the need for an [advanced directive](#) while the person is still healthy."

One of the key factors in scheduling periodic exams, according to Dowling, is life expectancy. According to the [National Center for Health Statistics](#), a man who is 65 is expected to live another 17.9 years (to age 82.9), while 65-year-old women are expected to live another 20.5 years

(to age 85.5). Another factor for patients to consider in scheduling a periodic exam is leading causes of death, Dowling said. The causes vary for 45- to 64-year olds and for those 65 and above, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Baby boomers and their doctors should also factor in the fact that they are five times more likely to have the hepatitis C virus than other adults, notes Dr. Shirley Uy, a UCLA family medicine expert. Hepatitis C can lead to liver damage, cirrhosis and even liver cancer. In response to a recommendation by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, UCLA Health has launched an initiative to screen baby boomers for the hepatitis C virus.

In contrast to Dowling, Dr. Cody Dashiell-Earp, a UCLA Health internal medicine expert, is a firm believer in annual exams, especially for boomers. "The annual exam is so much more than a physical," she says. "It's an opportunity for our primary care team—doctors, nurses and staff—to get to know you better. Discussing your care when you are feeling well is the best way to prevent and treat illness in the future."

Another proponent of once-yearly check-up is Dr. Ben Ansell, a UCLA professor of medicine.

"An annual physical for our baby-boomer patients is also an opportunity to discuss the appropriate timing of a screening colonoscopy," notes Ansell. "While no one enjoys the preparation involved for the procedure, it is the surest way to prevent colon cancer—the second-leading cause of death from cancer in the U.S., in which symptoms rarely are present early on. Patients over 50 years old (or those with colon cancer risk factors like family history) do themselves a disservice by putting off a colonoscopy," says Ansell.

UCLA's Department of Medicine recently launched Healthy U, a

program to ensure that its patients receive timely, customized and high-quality preventive care. When the patient involved is a baby boomer, UCLA experts agree, those visits should include specific discussions and tests for diabetes, heart disease, osteoporosis and other health concerns.

"Bottom line for boomers," says Dowling, "is to make sure you have a complete history and physical exam if your physician hasn't performed one within the past five years, and to factor in family history when discussing your health since some conditions are genetically linked."

Making sure they get that all-important time with their doctors, however, will not only keep America's baby boomers healthier, but also ensure that their longer lives are more meaningful and enjoyable.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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