

Q&A: Back-to-school physicals essential for all ages

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I always have a million things to do before my three children return to school. How important are back-to-school physicals, and is it critical to schedule one for my college-bound child and my younger kids?

ANSWER:

Late summer is often a busy time of purchasing [school](#) supplies, finding new clothes, and wrapping up summer vacations. Most kids need a well-child visit every year from age 3 to 21. So, adding a back-to-school physical to your list is valuable, especially for your older child, since there are increased risks for adolescents with some illnesses.

Getting a back-to-school physical done before summer ends is essential for many reasons.

Monitoring developmental process

During a routine physical, your primary care team will evaluate all your child's body systems to ensure there are no apparent problems. It is a great time to review eyesight, hearing and growth concerns. This lets you catch any problems early and get your child the best early intervention resources before the next school year starts.

Reviewing immunizations and medications

A physical involves reviewing your child's immunization records to ensure that he or she is up to date with all required immunizations. Your child's school—including college—may require this information before they can begin the new school year. Also, certain vaccines may be valuable—such as HPV and meningitis, which can affect people of any age, but it spreads easily among those living in close quarters. Hence, teens, [college students](#), and boarding-school students are at higher risk for a meningitis infection.

Also, a well-child visit is ideal for reviewing prescriptions and any over-the-counter medications. You can get forms signed that any of your

children may need and ensure refills are ordered for your college-bound student.

Sharing safety information

Giving your older child an opportunity to discuss safe behaviors, which could include discussions about sexually transmitted diseases, substance and alcohol use, and driving safety, is invaluable. The discussions can lead to prevention and/or early intervention regarding unsafe behaviors, keeping your child healthy and safer in the long term.

Discussing athlete care

Scheduling time for student-athletes is valuable to ensure they are ready to play sports and be active, especially if your [children](#) had a more leisurely summer. Another plus to a back-to-school physical is the opportunity to discuss [healthy eating](#), safe exercise practices and how to reduce the risk of injury while playing sports. Depending upon your child's sports, a baseline concussion test may be in order and information on how to manage return to play after a concussion.

Mental health and well-being

A back-to-school physical is also a great time to review cognitive or behavioral concerns. Does your child have trouble sleeping before a new school year starts? Is your child anxious when they take tests? Do you get reports that they are easily distracted or disruptive in class?

Sometimes these issues can have physical origins, such as poor eyesight. But a discussion about your child's [mental health](#) can be just as valuable as trying to uncover any concerns about aches, pains or eating habit changes.

Maintaining a relationship with your physician

By staying up to date with a routine physical, your child will also benefit from maintaining a relationship with their health care professional. As they grow older, each visit allows the child to develop important communication skills when discussing their health with their health care team. To make things easier on yourself, write down a list of questions about your child's health before your visit. You may go over many of the points during the exam, but you should have time to ask questions to ensure your [child](#)'s overall health and well-being.

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