

Vaccines, routines and screens: Tips for a healthy school year from a physician mom

August 15 2019, by From Mayo Clinic News Network



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It's back-to-school time, the time of year that often has parents rushing to buy school supplies, new clothes and healthy snacks to stock the

pantry. It also tends to bring stress around homework, earlier bedtimes and an influx of colds and coughs. Dr. Tina Ardon, a family medicine physician and mom of three, provides some back-to-school tips to keep parents and kids healthy in this Q&A.

Q: What are your top tips for parents during back-to-school time?

A: If I had to give parents three tips to think about before they go back to school, No. 1 would be to make sure your child's immunizations are up-to-date. The second thing would be to have an eye exam to make sure there are no concerns. You would hate to start back at school having trouble seeing the board or reading books. And then third, I would make sure parents are really looking at getting back on a good routine in terms of sleeping and screen time.

Q: Who should have a back-to-school physical?

A: I would recommend a back-to-school physical for a child that has not been seen by his or her physician in over a year, particularly to identify any areas that may impact the child's ability to learn, or if he or she is going to be participating in sports or other [physical activities](#).

Q: Why is a sports physical so important?

A: The reason why getting a sports physical is so important is so that we can ask the right types of family history questions regarding things like heart disease or unexpected deaths from a heart attack, or things of that nature. We can talk about the type of sport, maybe what position they're playing and past injuries. And this may help us decide if further testing, like cardiac testing, needs to be done or if we will encourage a baseline concussion test because they're at risk for having injury during the school year.

Q: Who needs a baseline concussion test?

A: The patients who really should consider baseline concussion testing are those who are at higher risk for concussions, such as kids who are playing contact sports or in activities that are higher risk. And it's not just football. It can be activities like soccer, where there is a risk of running into someone or injuring the head, or cheerleading, where maybe the student's being thrown up into the air for an aerial trick.

Q: What is important to review for younger students in terms of immunizations and boosters needed during this time of year?

A: If you have a child of kindergarten age, about 4 to 6 years of age, we want to make sure they're up-to-date on their measles, mumps and rubella vaccine, and the chickenpox vaccine. We'll affectionately call the seventh grade shot "the tetanus booster," so that's something to think about for those children in that age range, as well. And depending on the age of the student, we'll want to talk about HPV if that hasn't been done already.

Q: What vaccines are important for high school or college-age students?

A: For older students, we're going to want to make sure they're up-to-date on all their childhood vaccines, obviously, but also make sure that they've received a meningitis vaccine. Meningitis is an infection that typically occurs in young children or adolescents, and we tend to see it in places where people are living in close quarters, such as in a college dorm. It can be a very serious infection. Again, we definitely want to talk about HPV if that hasn't been done already.

Q: Any tips about routines, bedtimes or homework?

A: Routines are really important for our children, but there is a role for

allowing them to gain some independence in terms of making their own decision when it comes to their schoolwork, what they have for their snack after school and those sorts of things. I think laying out clear expectations for our children is helpful, too, to set good habits and routines. Of course, getting a good night's sleep and limiting screen time is important to keep our body and minds sharp. I encourage parents to talk to their children and their teachers, as well as their family physician, if they see things that are concerning, such as anxiety before tests or complaints about vision or headaches.

Q: Any last thoughts?

A: Back to school is a great time to start fresh and establish new routines and healthy habits. I would also remind parents to check in with their children and include them in decisions. And to take time for yourself, too. It's a hectic time of year.

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Citation: Vaccines, routines and screens: Tips for a healthy school year from a physician mom (2019, August 15) retrieved 19 September 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-08-vaccines-routines-screens-healthy-school.html>

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