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A Patient's Guide to the "Annual Physical"

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1. Prioritize and Verbalize

In advance of your physician appointment be certain to identify YOUR primary health and wellness concerns and YOUR expectations and goals for the visit. It is important to clarify your expectations for your healthcare provider, particularly if your concerns are more preventive in nature. In our disease-oriented healthcare system, doctors typically use information from the patient interview and physical examination to diagnose and treat illness. Appointment times are often brief, only allowing adequate time to make decisions for management of the acute problem. There is little time available during the visit to address preventive health education and counseling on matters such as specific nutrition recommendations, weight management, exercise guidelines, stress management and depression, and smoking cessation. You can help your healthcare provider meet your needs by clearly stating your wellness concerns and personal goals.

2. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

One of the most important steps in your annual physical is an update or review of the history of illnesses in your blood relatives. Many diseases have a strong hereditary predisposition. A detailed family history can help your provider predict which conditions may be short- or long-term concerns for you. This information is invaluable in determining the appropriateness and timing of certain screening tests for early detection of disease. Also, remember that while it is not possible to choose our parents, it is possible to make healthy lifestyle choices to reduce the risk of developing hereditary diseases.

3. The Old-Fashioned Way

With the rapid advances in medical technology there has been a tendency for both physicians and patients to rely more upon body imaging and less upon the physical examination. Even the most uncomfortable parts of the physical examination, such as rectal and pelvic exams, provide valuable information that cannot be obtained through imaging or blood work. Though you may not have noticed any personal physical changes, your physician is trained to identify more subtle abnormalities. A thorough "annual physical" must include a thorough *physical examination* for early detection and prevention.

4. Do I Measure Up?

Obesity and the Metabolic Syndrome are epidemic in the US and are associated with an increased risk of developing diabetes and cardiovascular disease. The Metabolic Syndrome is easily diagnosed with a cholesterol or lipid profile, blood pressure readings, and measurement of waist circumference, which should be a routine part of every annual physical. It is often recognized in an individual with an "apple-shaped" body (overweight through the abdomen),



rather than the “pear-shaped” body (overweight through the hips). The metabolic syndrome is very responsive to treatment with healthy nutrition, weight loss, and exercise, though medication may be necessary. Determination of your Body Mass Index and Body Composition or percent body fat are also useful guides for your provider when making nutrition and exercise recommendations.

5. “Screen Me, *Please!*”

Early detection leads to improved prognosis for many of the most common chronic diseases. There are published professional guidelines for performance of screening studies for a number of diseases. Unfortunately, the majority of Americans misses one or more of these important screening tests and misses the opportunity for early detection and improved outcomes. Discuss with your physician the schedule of recommended preventive screenings, including blood glucose, fasting insulin level, Mammography, PAP smear, bone densitometry (women)—OR—Prostate Specific Antigen and prostate exam (men), screening for colorectal cancer (men and women), lipid profile (men and women), and screening for abdominal aortic aneurysm (men over age 65 with smoking history or others at risk).

6. “Off the record...”

The confidential office of your physician is the perfect place to safely discuss concerns you have about potentially dangerous habits or lifestyle choices. Issues that should routinely be addressed include tobacco use, alcohol intake, eating disorders, medication overuse (sleeping or narcotic pain medications, tranquilizers, laxatives or purgatives, diuretics), and unsafe sexual practices. While these are highly-sensitive topics, they each have significant medical complications which should be considered during your annual exam. In addition, your physician can guide you to resources for treatment or management of these problems.

7. Diet dilemmas.

Optimal wellness and disease prevention cannot be achieved without a healthy nutritional plan. However, many Americans are befuddled by the seemingly contradictory and constantly changing information about what truly represents a healthy diet. Contrary to what the multitude of diet book authors may propose, the best diet is a “low fad” diet. While many diet plans help you to lose weight quickly by restricting access to certain food groups, very few of these plans succeed in helping you to maintain long-term or permanent weight loss. Discuss nutrition with your physician at the time of your annual physical and consider consultation with a registered dietitian to determine what the best diet is for you and your individual medical concerns. When seeking nutrition information, refer to professional, evidence-based resources such as the American Dietetic Association, the American Heart Association, and the American Cancer Society.

8. Get moving!

It is likely that at your annual physical the physician will suggest you begin a program of consistent exercise, but you may have physical limitations or be reluctant to follow this advice. For some it is a matter of lack of prioritization, but for many individuals there are legitimate medical concerns that limit compliance with exercise recommendations. If you have musculoskeletal problems such as joint or muscle pain, a history of cardiovascular disease or hypertension, osteoporosis, diabetes, or other medical conditions, ask your physician for referral



to a clinical exercise physiologist, physical therapist, or cardiac rehabilitation program for an exercise evaluation and individualized prescription. There are very few medical conditions that are not significantly benefited by appropriate aerobic, resistive (weights), and flexibility (stretching) exercises. Men and women with risk factors for cardiovascular disease may need a Treadmill Stress Test prior to beginning a program of exercise.

9. The “Mind-body Connection”

The “mind-body connection” is not just a catch phrase. There is strong scientific evidence that stress, anxiety, and depression have important effects on physical well-being. Your annual physical should include an open discussion of personal stressors (occupational concerns, financial difficulties, family illness, elderly relatives, etc.) and any symptoms of anxiety, irritability, tension, or depression. These conditions not only have physiologic effects on the body, but can also cause individuals to neglect healthy lifestyle recommendations for exercise and nutrition. Your physician may suggest counseling with a psychologist or psychiatrist, and in some cases, medication may be helpful.

10. “ZZZZZZZZZ!”

A restful night’s sleep benefits not only the sleeper but also the sleeper’s bed partner! With the epidemic of obesity in our nation comes an epidemic of obstructive sleep apnea, a medical condition that can lead to snoring, daytime somnolence, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease. During your annual visit with your physician, discuss your sleep patterns and note any loud or disruptive snoring, periods of apnea (pauses in breathing), or drowsiness during the daytime. You should also mention difficulties with frequent urination during the night, insomnia, restless legs, and early morning awakening, symptoms, which may be suggestive of other medical conditions.

11. “Friends or foes?”

As we have learned with recent drug withdrawals and complications from over-the-counter supplements, there is no such thing as a “safe” drug or supplement. While medications and supplements may have life-saving benefits or provide relief of symptoms, all may be associated with side effects in certain individuals or medical conditions. There may also be significant drug-drug or drug-vitamin-supplement interactions. At the time of your annual physical provide your physician with a complete list of all prescription and over-the-counter medications, vitamins, herbs, or other supplements you are taking or have recently taken. This is a timely opportunity to review any potential interactions or side effects and to be certain that your regimen is a safe and beneficial one.

12. Keeping a “paper trail”

And finally, it’s not finished until the paperwork is complete. After the results are in from your annual physical, request a copy of any laboratory work, diagnostic studies, consultations, and the physician’s report for your personal records. Maintain a notebook or binder with all of your personal medical records and any nutritional or exercise recommendations. Your health and health care must be in your control, and the paper trail will keep you at the helm.

