



“I had a physical at school”

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The question of whether or not a child needs a physical at the doctor's office is one that arises frequently. Screening exams are provided at school, so why not take advantage of them?

The screening physical at school is provided for children who are unable to have a health supervision visit with their own health care provider. Its purpose is to screen for the presence of major defects, which left undetected, could ultimately affect the quality of life. Scheduled at 10-12 children per hour, time constraints significantly limit the scope of these physicals. School physicals focus on diagnosing significant health problems that have evolved since the last visit at their health care provider's office. An example of a typical finding would be a heart murmur, hernia or an undescended testicle.

The health supervision visit provided at a doctor's office is designed with several goals in mind. The first goal is prevention of disease through immunization and health education. This includes health guidance to promote a better understanding of physical growth, psychosocial and cognitive development. In addition, education to promote the reduction of injuries, including avoiding the use of cigarettes, alcohol or drugs and the use of safety devices including seatbelts, helmets and appropriate sports protective devices is given. Dietary counseling including ways to achieve a healthy diet and safe weight management are included. The benefits of exercise and other healthy lifestyle choices are discussed. Adolescents receive health guidance regarding responsible sexual behavior, including abstinence.

The next goal of the health supervision visit is early detection and treatment of disease. This is accomplished through a comprehensive history and physical exam. Screening tests (such as laboratory work for cholesterol or hemoglobin levels), based on each individual's personal risk factors, may be included as well.

Lastly, parents receive guidance in multiple aspects of childrearing. Well child visits offer an opportunity to identify potential and real problems in psychosocial adjustment, to prevent potential disorders, treat actual disorders early in their course and provide referrals for children and their families with illnesses or relational problems that are beyond the scope of the primary care practitioner.

In contrast to the school physical, these visits are scheduled for 20-60 minutes depending on whether parents have identified concerns prior to scheduling the appointment. This time frame allows for completion of each of the three stated objectives.

As you can see, when kids say they had a “physical” at school, it is not the same as or meant to be a substitute for a comprehensive health supervision visit at your health care provider's office.

Your doctor knows you and your family best. Nothing takes the place of talking directly with your doctor about your health and questions that you have. The information provided here is not medical care or treatment and is not specific to your situation. You need to contact your own doctor for your medical care.