

But I'm Not Sick!

Why a Healthy Child Needs to Visit the Doctor

By Stanley L. Wiggins, M.D.

Q: When my son was a baby, we always took him to the doctor for well-baby exams, but do we really need to keep doing this for him now that he is in school?

A: Yes! August, just prior to the beginning of school, is the perfect time for your child to have a physical exam. Parents often question why their healthy children still need to visit the doctor. Here are a few reasons why a school-aged child still needs a routine physical:

- A well-child exam is a head-to-toe examination that allows your physician to detect subtle findings, such as unusual moles, hernias, high blood pressure, abnormal heart murmurs, and scoliosis.
- Height and weight are evaluated to ensure that children are growing appropriately. This is a good time for parents to ask questions about diet and nutrition. Hearing and vision also are screened.
- Vaccines are done at appropriate ages. Before starting school, children need four vaccines. The DTaP vaccine immunizes against diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus. The IPV immunizes against polio. The MMR vaccine is needed for measles, mumps and rubella immunization. The VZV protects children from contracting the chicken pox. Some of these vaccines may be combined to reduce the amount of shots your child receives. Be sure to ask your physician if they have combined vaccines. Before seventh grade, students need a Tdap vaccine which is a combined tetanus and pertussis booster. The meningococcal vaccine is also commonly given at this age. It protects against meningococcal meningitis, a potentially life-threatening infection of the brain and spinal cord that is commonly contracted among students living in close quarters. Most colleges will require this vaccine for entry. Even when given at age 11, the vaccine protects through college.

- Important laboratory studies will insure your child is screened for certain illnesses. A finger-stick hemoglobin screens for anemia. A urinalysis is used to evaluate kidney function and test for diabetes. Adolescents should also have their cholesterol checked.
- Time is allowed to assess school performance, behavioral issues, and social concerns. During the well-child visit, your physician can share helpful resources on dealing with problems at school or home. Many times this advice can't be crammed into a visit when your child is sick.
- Doctors discuss important child safety precautions. Children hear their physicians share the importance of wearing a bike helmet, brushing their teeth, getting exercise, and water safety. These are just a few of the topics that would be difficult to discuss during a visit when your child is not feeling well.

In addition to all of the reasons cited above, the relaxed pace during a well-child visit allows your physician to offer age-appropriate guidance on peer pressure and drug and alcohol use. Parents often appreciate physicians reinforcing the messages offered at home.

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