

School-Age Physical Exams



Parents of newborns quickly learn that regular doctor visits are necessary to keep up with their child's rapid growth and busy immunization schedule.

By the time children enter kindergarten, they've achieved key developmental milestones and completed all the immunizations recommended for their age. However, this is no time to abandon the routine physical examination.

"The state of California requires students entering first grade to have written verification of a physical examination within the previous 18 months," says **Dr. Leticia Oliveros**, a pediatrician at University of California, Irvine Medical Center. "But children from kindergarten through high school need ongoing medical checkups to monitor their growth and make sure they have their final immunizations." Starting at

age 2 through age 18, young patients should have a thorough physical every year. Those with an existing chronic condition should be examined more frequently.

The checkup. Along with a review and update of the youngster's medical history, a physical will encompass a head-to-toe examination, including height, weight, blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, vision and hearing. A urine test to screen for kidney problems and a blood test for anemia are also routine. Additionally, the doctor may check for signs of spinal curvature (scoliosis) and prescribe nutritional counseling and other therapies, if needed. "In addition to the routine physical exam, tests for conditions such as diabetes, tuberculosis, anemia or high cholesterol may be conducted if the child is at risk for these diseases, or if symptoms warrant it," says Oliveros.

As a child matures, the routine physical will address new issues that develop during puberty. If menstrual problems or birth control questions arise, girls may have their first gynecological exam. Boys will be taught how to conduct a testicular self-exam and girls a breast self-exam. "The doctor may introduce discussions about subjects such as acne treatment, sexually transmitted diseases and weight concerns," says Oliveros. "The goal is to educate teenagers so they know that help is available."

Regular physical exams from childhood through adolescence can create a lifelong habit of good health.

Another important objective of school-age physicals is to complete the immunization schedule recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "Proof of immunization is

required by California state law for students entering kindergarten and seventh grade," notes Oliveros.

Immunizations. While most immunizations are taken care of by the time a child begins school, the CDC recommends two additional rounds of school-time vaccinations. First, a child preparing to enter kindergarten should receive the final doses of DTaP (tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis), IPV (inactivated poliovirus), MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) and chickenpox (varicella). The state of California requires these immunizations, as well as three hepatitis B inoculations (which are typically completed by six months of age).

The final round of CDC-recommended immunizations should be administered at age 11 or 12. These include a booster shot of DTaP; MCV4 (meningococcal conjugate vaccine), which protects against most forms of meningitis; and, for girls, HPV (human papillomavirus), a three-injection series that prevents genital warts and most forms of cervical cancer.

Children of any age who are preparing to join organized sports should have a specialized exam that focuses on pre-existing or potential conditions that may affect their ability to participate, such as heart murmur, irregular heartbeat, hernia or asthma. A rule of thumb is to schedule the sports physical at least six weeks before the first practice.

In addition to keeping a child healthy and safe, school-age physicals have an additional benefit. "A regular schedule of physical exams from childhood through adolescence can create a lifelong habit of good health," says Oliveros. For referral to a UC Irvine Medical Center pediatrician, call 877-UCI-DOCS.

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