

Student athletes: Sports physical or doctor's exam?

As the start of school approaches, many athletes will receive reminders about sports forms – and the physical exams needed to complete those forms. Then comes the question: Should my child get the school-sponsored “sports physical” or a full well-child check-up from our doctor?

When performed in a large group setting or at an urgent care, sports physicals are much less thorough than the yearly exam your child's pediatrician provides. Most sports physicals are just limited, focused sports pre-participation examinations that are required by schools and the state high school athletic association. The purpose is to identify any significant medical condition or history that may preclude a child's participation or requires further workup.

Sports physicals offered in a group setting employ a station format, with the child being examined by different people for each area required on the form. These very limited, cursory exams are usually performed by people who do not know your child and do not have access to medical records and history. If they do find a problem, you will be referred to a physician for follow-up.

While convenient, these kinds of exams do not benefit your child – and you as parent – as much as a comprehensive yearly physical done by your child's primary care provider will. Your child's doctor will use knowledge of your child, his or her records and your family medical history to more fully assess any health risks or limitations and decide whether your child needs further medical attention prior to playing a sport. Your doctor also may be able to discuss injury prevention, training and nutrition based on your child's level of development.

Sports can be a source of great pleasure and accomplishment for children of all ages. Be sure they can play at their best by visiting your doctor first.

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