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# Guide to Making the Most of Your Annual Doctor's Visit



To get the best health care possible, it's important that you and your doctor work as partners. The most crucial aspect of this partnership is good, clear communication. This calls for brief preparation before each visit. How many times have you left the doctor's office and then remembered all those questions you wanted to ask or information you wanted to share with your doctor? Before your next visit, take some time to prepare.

2 | An annual health exam is a good time to assess your overall health and establish a working relationship with your doctor. At this time, your doctor may be able to identify potential problems early, when they may still be preventable or easily treatable. How frequently you visit your doctor depends on your age and medical history – so ask how often you should schedule visits.

In creating this guide, Merck sought the input of doctors and patients with the sole purpose of helping people have more productive medical check-ups. Merck is making this guide available at no cost as a service to the community.

We hope this guide provides you with information that will enable you to have a more productive visit with your doctor or other health care professional.

# Checking Up on Your Health

Some people need certain screening tests earlier, or more often, than others. Talk to your doctor about which of the tests below are right for you, when you should have them, and how often.

## WOMEN

Screening Exam	Recommended Guidelines*
Blood Pressure	At least every two years.
Skin Exams	Talk to your doctor about skin cancer screenings.
Pap Test	Every one to three years if you have been sexually active or are older than 21.
Cholesterol	Regularly starting at 45. If you smoke, have diabetes, or if heart disease runs in your family, start at 20.
Mammograms	Every one to two years starting at 40.
Diabetes Tests	Have a test if you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol.
Colorectal Cancer Tests	Regular tests starting at 50; your doctor can help decide which tests and how often.
Osteoporosis Tests	Request a bone density test at 65. You may need earlier testing if at high risk. Talk to your doctor.

## MEN

Screening Exam	Recommended Guidelines*
Blood Pressure	At least every two years.
Skin Exams	Talk to your doctor about skin cancer screenings.
Cholesterol	At least every five years, starting at 35. If you smoke, have diabetes, or if heart disease runs in your family, start at 20.
Diabetes Tests	Have a test if you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol.
Colorectal Cancer Tests	Regular tests starting at 50; your doctor can help you decide which tests and how often.
Prostate Cancer Screening	Talk to your doctor about benefits and harms of prostate cancer screening if you are considering having a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) test or digital rectal examination (DRE).

\*Based on recommendations by the United States Preventive Services Task Force. AHRQ Pub. No. APPIP03-0008, January 2004, and APPIP03-0011, revised February 2004.

\*\*Check with your insurance provider to determine which tests are covered in your plan. If you don't have health insurance, visit the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid services at [cms.hhs.gov](https://www.cms.hhs.gov) to see if you qualify for coverage.

## Two Simple Steps to Prepare for Your Visit

**1. Take about 15 to 30 minutes to prepare for your annual health exam. Think about any changes in your health since your last exam. Are there certain problems you are experiencing? Do you have questions about what tests you should have? Is there information about your family medical history you should share with your doctor? Tell the doctor your main health concerns, even if they seem far-fetched.**

The following symptoms checklist suggests some possibilities; mark any that apply to you. In the notes section on page 11, write down questions related to these issues that you might have for your doctor. Although some of this information may already be in your doctor's records, it is always a good idea to discuss your current concerns with your doctor at each visit.

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- Unexplained headaches
- Chest pains
- Trouble breathing
- Unexplained tiredness
- Changes in bowel habits
- Blood in your stool or black stools
- Frequent, difficult or uncontrolled urination
- Menstrual cycle changes
- Breast lump or discharge
- Frequent leg cramps
- Muscle weakness
- Changes in skin moles or development of new moles
- Recurrent rash or itching
- Blurred vision or other vision problems
- Feelings of sadness, hopelessness or loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities for more than two years



**2. Now, think about your personal life. It is important for your doctor to know about you to help identify the causes of any medical problems you are experiencing or for which you might be at risk. The following questions deal with both your current state of health and past medical issues about which you should remind your physician even if they are already in your medical record.**

- Do members of your family (parent, sibling, relative) suffer from heart disease, diabetes, cancer, or some other illness?
- Do certain foods or medicines cause you to break out in a rash, hives, or experience other allergic reactions?
- Are you a smoker or exposed to second-hand smoke?
- Are you using a prescription, over-the-counter medicine, or dietary supplement? If yes, then it is helpful to bring the bottles with you.
- If you drink, do you have questions or concerns about your use of alcohol?
- Have you traveled internationally to places where you might have been exposed to an illness?

## At the Doctor's Office

Generally, during a routine visit, your doctor will take a thorough medical history, conduct a physical exam, take a urine specimen and draw blood for laboratory tests.

### Medical history

This is a good chance to tell your doctor about yourself — your personal habits, any changes or problems since the last visit and your concerns — and ask questions about your health.

### Physical exam

During a physical exam, your doctor will typically measure your weight and blood pressure, and examine you from head to toe. It is important to point out any changes in your body that you have noticed.

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### Laboratory tests

Often, blood tests are done to seek clues to a wide variety of possible disorders. Blood tests for blood cell counts, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels also are performed to make sure you are within the normal range. A urine analysis may also be conducted to check for kidney problems.

An EKG may be conducted to evaluate the health of your heart.



## Consider Asking Your Doctor...

### About your medicine

- What should I know about or be aware of while taking this medicine?
- When do I need to take this medicine? For how long?
- Will this medicine interact with the other medicines I am taking? Tell your doctor what other medicines you are taking, including over-the-counter products and herbal medicines.
- What if I miss a dose?

If you cannot afford the medicines prescribed or do not have drug coverage, ask your doctor about assistance programs for which you may be eligible. You also can find help through the Partnership for Prescription Assistance (PPA), a central source of information for a variety of patient assistance programs. To access the PPA, call 888-4PPA-NOW (888-477-2669) or visit [PPARx.org](http://PPARx.org)

### About your exam

- What screening tests will I receive at this visit? Is there anything I should be aware of with these tests?
- (Women) How often should I perform a breast exam? Can you show me how to perform a self-exam and what I should be looking for?
- Do I need any vaccinations or booster shots?
- Am I at risk for any particular disease? What should I do to prevent or monitor the risk?
- What are my blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels? What should my goals be for these levels and what do I need to do to get there?

Knowing your family's medical history can be an important predictor of your risk to certain diseases. Based on your family medical history, your doctor may recommend earlier screenings or other preventative measures.

At your next gathering, talk with your family about creating a medical history tree. Discuss the importance of knowing your family's medical history in staying healthy. Complete your history first, then ask each of your family members to fill in the appropriate section of the tree.

For a free guide on building your own family history tree, visit [MerckSource.com](http://MerckSource.com) and click on "You and Your Doctor" and then "Health Forms and Records."

## Helpful Tips

- Be honest and don't downplay or exaggerate symptoms.
- To avoid feeling rushed, arrive early for your appointment to fill out important medical forms.
- Consider bringing your spouse, friend or notepad to record your doctor's advice and other important information.
- Ask for brochures, pamphlets or other resources for additional information that addresses your questions.
- Find out who you can call between visits if you have questions.

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## After Your Visit

- Call your doctor to obtain results from blood tests and other exams.
- Fill any prescriptions and take as directed. Call your doctor immediately if any problems occur after beginning treatment.
- Schedule a follow-up visit with the doctor, if needed.
- Follow up with a specialist, if advised. Make sure you get the proper referral from your primary care doctor, if required.
- Follow recommended action steps (e.g., lose weight, follow a low-salt diet).
- Get more information on a disease, test, or treatment on the Internet or from a trusted medical reference book, such as *The Merck Manual of Medical Information – Home Edition*.\*
- Update and keep readily available your personal medical history.
- If you have your blood pressure measured outside the doctor's office (e.g., at a pharmacy or health fair) be sure to record it and bring it to your next visit.

\* *The Merck Manual of Medical Information – Home Edition* and other valuable health information are available free in a number of languages at [MerckManuals.com](http://MerckManuals.com)



## Commonly Asked Questions

- 1. When I call the doctor, I tend to minimize my symptoms even if I'm really worried because I don't want to sound like an alarmist. What do you advise?** Tell the doctor, nurse or physician assistant that you are not sure how important your symptoms are, but you are concerned and would appreciate the doctor's advice.
- 2. At my last annual visit, my doctor advised me to lose weight and eat a more nutritious diet, but I haven't. Now I am embarrassed to go back. What do you advise?** It's always important to follow your doctor's advice, but doctors understand that sometimes it can be difficult. At your next visit, talk with your doctor about the problems you may have incorporating healthy foods and exercise into your daily life. Your doctor also may be able to suggest or refer you to a dietician or personal fitness instructor for more help. Be honest with your doctor; discuss any questions or concerns you might have.
- 3. I recently moved. How can I find a new doctor?** Check with your health insurance provider to find a list of approved doctors in your area. You can also search the directory of the American Academy of Family Physicians at [FamilyDoctor.org](http://FamilyDoctor.org).
- 4. My health insurance covers a visit to the doctor but not prescriptions. What do you recommend?** There are many assistance and discount programs that can help you pay for your prescriptions. Ask your doctor to recommend a program or visit [MerckHelps.com](http://MerckHelps.com).





The *Guide to Making the Most of Your Annual Doctor's Visit* is brought to you by Merck & Co., Inc. Contents in this guide are based on recommendations of physicians and patients. The guide does not promote any medicines and is intended to support a productive office visit between patients and their physicians. Merck is providing this guide free of charge as a service to the community.

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To order additional free copies of the *Guide to Making the Most of Your Annual Doctor's Visit*, call (888) MERCK-38 (888-637-2538) or visit [YourHealthNow.com](http://YourHealthNow.com).

## Additional resources

### **Your Health Now: [YourHealthNow.com](http://YourHealthNow.com)**

*Your Health Now* is a new bi-monthly health magazine that puts useful, timely and unbiased health information directly into the hands of the general public. *Your Health Now* is enhanced by information and insights from The Merck Manuals and is being provided free of charge as part of Merck's commitment to providing health information resources to patients. It does not promote any pharmaceutical medicines. To sign up for a free subscription, visit [YourHealthNow.com](http://YourHealthNow.com) or call 888-MERCK-38 (888-637-2538).

### **MerckSource: [MerckSource.com](http://MerckSource.com)**

A comprehensive medical Web site where patients can learn about health conditions. Medical professionals write the unbiased content on the site, which is available free of charge. Patients can find interactive health tools, 3-D illustrations, forms to track their health, and more suggestions on how to make their doctor's visit more productive.

### **The Merck Manuals: [MerckManuals.com](http://MerckManuals.com)**

The world's best-selling health guide provides health information with no product advertising or promotion. It's free online.

### **MerckHelps: [MerckHelps.com](http://MerckHelps.com)**

Provides information on how eligible patients can get medicines free or at a discount through the Merck Patient Assistance Program and the Merck Prescription Discount Program.

### **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ): [AHRQ.gov/consumer](http://AHRQ.gov/consumer)**

A government organization dedicated to improving the quality, safety, efficiency, and effectiveness of health care for Americans. Here you will find helpful resources including "Next Steps After Your Diagnosis: Finding Information and Support." You also can order this booklet by calling 800-358-9295. Ask for publication number 05-0049.

### **American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP): [FamilyDoctor.org](http://FamilyDoctor.org)**

One of the nation's largest medical organizations, offers helpful information, including tips on how to talk to your doctor, how to get the most from your medicine, and how to create a health journal. Just click on "Smart Patient Guide."

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