THE ADOLESCENT WELLNESS EXAM
A Resource from the American College of Preventive Medicine

A Guide for Patients
A Time for Questions and Answers

When you think about important relationships with adults in your life, does your doctor come to mind? Probably not, but he or she should be on the list. A good relationship with your doctor can be a blessing during the teen years because there are so many issues that teens have to deal with. Your doctor can help you with all of these challenges. The annual wellness exam is the foundation of this relationship. It is the one consistent time you will see him or her every year. It is a very important visit because there are so many changes from year to year.

Your doctor is your personal health adviser and advocate. He or she is your source for straight answers to any question you may have about your health and well-being. There are no dumb questions in a wellness visit. This is a time for answers. It is a time to ease any doubts or insecurities you have about your growth and development. Your doctor will be honest with you and will always look out for your best interests. His or her purpose is to help, not to judge.

The teen years are often the most challenging years of our life due to:

- rapid physical growth and changing hormones
- emergence of conditions such as acne or allergies
- the need to fit in, to be accepted
- the pressure to experiment, to take risks
- challenges to self esteem, including body image
- coping with sexual maturity and relationships with the opposite sex
- dealing with extremes of emotions, such as violence and depression
- being torn between dependence and independence
- parents that are overly controlling

A wellness visit is like a check-up, but it is much more than that. It is a time for you and your doctor to reacquaint, to talk about your life and any issues that are troubling you. Nothing is off limits. Everything you discuss is confidential, unless, of course, the doctor feels that your well-being is seriously at risk. In that case, he or she will tell you that this is something that the two of you need to discuss with your parents. Together, you will decide how best to do this. Your doctor will never go behind your back to talk to your parents. Sometimes the issue is simply how to bring up an issue with parents.

The important part of the wellness visit is this conversation about the challenges of adolescence. All of these issues affect health and wellness. Sometimes, just talking about them with someone who understands them and is nonjudgmental is enough to relieve your anxiety. Your doctor will also help you develop strategies for anticipating...
and dealing with troublesome issues so you know how to handle them when they do occur.

Other topics that will be touched on, if not already addressed, include:
- Safety practices (use of seatbelts, helmets, lifejackets, etc.)
- Eating habits
- Physical activity habits
- School performance and enjoyment
- Smoking, alcohol, drugs, unsafe sex, other risk taking activities
- Relationships (e.g., parents, family, friends, peers, teachers)
- Future plans and goals

After this discussion, the doctor will leave the room for you to put on an examination gown. When you are ready, he or she will return and do a brief physical exam. This will cover your body from head to toe to check for any unforeseen physical problems.

What you can do to get the most out of your wellness visit:
- First, be honest about everything. Show the doctor you trust him or her by telling him or her what is really going on. Do not feel like you are the only one dealing with any particular issue. He or she has heard it all before, probably many times.
- Second, do not hold back. Bring up everything that is affecting you, even if it does not seem like a big deal. It could be part of a larger problem.
- Third, embrace the opportunity. Go into the visit with a positive attitude. Think ahead about questions you would like to ask. Write them down so you do not forget.
- Fourth, if you do not understand something, say so. The doctor will assume that you understand unless you say you do not.

What your parents can do to help:
- Encourage you to continue getting annual wellness exams
- Support the independent relationship between you and your doctor
- Respect the confidentiality of this relationship
- Ask for guidance in areas where they can help
- Support the recommendations of the doctor

Do you take advantage of your yearly wellness exam? Most teens do not. Many think they no longer need them, especially in their late teen years. They believe that the only time they need to go to the doctor is when they are sick. Older teens sometimes think that they have outgrown their “kids” doctor. They are less willing to discuss risky behaviors or other sensitive issues. Does that sound like you? If you are not comfortable with your doctor for any reason, talk to your parents about it. You can change doctors. Do not let this keep you from getting a wellness exam.

Think about what you have to gain from this brief visit. At the very least, you will learn something about yourself and foster a relationship with your doctor that you can count on if you ever need help. At best, the doctor will help you resolve an issue that is affecting your life. The teen years are challenging enough without additional issues to deal with. Life can be overwhelming with these issues. Use your doctor to help you stay strong and healthy in all aspects of your life. You will enjoy this special time so much more.

For other information and useful links, visit the American College of Preventive Medicine website at www.acpm.org.