

Do I really need an annual checkup with my doctor?

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People who ask this question fall into two groups. The first one says “I’m very healthy and I never fall sick. Why do I need to go see my doctor?”. The other one says “I’m in the doctor’s office almost every month with so many medical problems. Why do I need to go in separately for an annual visit?”. These are valid questions but I hope to convince you that both groups of people can benefit from an annual preventive health visit with their doctor.

Many conditions are “silent”, i.e. you don’t feel bad or experience any symptoms until it is too late and you have a catastrophic event like a heart attack or a stroke. The annual visit allows the doctor to monitor otherwise healthy seeming people for silent killers like high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and obesity. If these are caught early and managed with appropriate lifestyle changes and/or medications, many major problems can be avoided later in life. In addition, they discuss vitamin deficiencies, cancer screenings and immunizations depending on the age and gender. Over the years I have found many cancers in the early stages because someone came in for their annual preventive visit. This is also the time when I do a full physical exam and have found life threatening skin cancers and heart murmurs in otherwise “healthy” people. Your doctor also gets a chance to address mental and emotional health during this visit. It is essentially a time when you can get a full picture of your health, not just get treated for your stomach flu or poison ivy rash or whatever is ailing you at that point.

Similarly, for those who have so many medical problems that they are in and out of their doctor’s office every few weeks, they’re always focused on fixing the acute problem and never have a chance to address things like cancer screenings and immunizations. The annual visit is when insidious problems like excess alcohol use, domestic violence, fall risks and elder abuse are brought to attention. For older patients, the doctor can check on their memory for early signs of Alzheimer’s disease. They can talk about their social life, if they are suffering from loneliness or depression, both of which can adversely affect their physical health. These are issues that they don’t normally have time to discuss during a problem visit when your legs are swelling up because you have heart failure or you’re having yeast infections from your high blood sugars.

So a recap for the healthy – get your blood pressure, sugar, cholesterol and weight checked. Get your immunizations updated and your cancer screenings completed every year.

For those who seem to always be in the doctor’s office, the preventive visit will allow your doctor to not just update your immunizations and cancer screenings, but also watch for subtle issues like memory problems, excess alcohol use, loneliness and depression.

We are right now so hyper-focused on COVID that many people are ignoring other things that are more likely to kill them. A deluge of cancer deaths is expected from missed cancer screenings. Don't be a part of that statistic. Once the Omicron surge is past, don't ignore your next reminder call from your doctor's office for your annual preventive visit. It might just save

your life. Take control of your health and set an intentional path for a healthier you in the coming years. Best of health to us all!