

What to expect at your well-woman exam:

A well-woman exam is an annual preventive screening to make sure you're healthy, and to look for signs of breast or gynecological conditions that might require further testing or treatment. During the visit, your doctor will discuss your health and lifestyle behaviors and will perform a physical exam of your pelvis and breasts.

Please note that you should only schedule a well-woman exam if you feel that you are healthy and aren't exhibiting any symptoms that might concern you about your health – otherwise, you should schedule a gynecological exam and let our office know about any symptoms that concern you.

Why is a well-woman exam important?

It is important for women of all ages to maintain their health and wellness. The annual well-woman exam is important in the early detection of disease. Problems found early are less likely to become serious health risks.

In addition to a physical exam that assesses overall health, a well-woman exam includes breast and pelvic physical exams, a Pap smear, and other laboratory and imaging studies as needed.

When should you start scheduling well-woman exams?

Starting at age 21, women should get annual pelvic exams, which include an external inspection and an internal speculum exam. Younger women do not need internal exams unless they experience a menstrual disorder, vaginal discharge, pelvic pain, or other reproductive-related symptoms.

Another important part of the well-woman visit is the breast exam. These should be done every one to three years for women ages 20 to 39. Women ages 40 and older should have annual clinical breast exams and annual mammograms.

Pelvic Exams

The pelvic exam specifically determines if the outer sexual parts (vulva and labia) and the inner organs (vagina, cervix, uterus and ovaries) are healthy. A Pap smear is done as part of a gynecological exam. To do this, your care provider will look at the outer area for any problems then gently insert a sterile instrument called a speculum into the vagina, in order to see the entire vagina and the lower part of the uterus called the cervix. This allows your care provider to observe any abnormal discharge or appearance to the vagina and cervix. Try to relax. You should feel some pressure during the procedure, but no pain.

Pap Smear:

The Pap smear is a screening test for cervical cancer. Cells scraped from the opening of the cervix are examined under a microscope. The cervix is the lower part of the uterus (womb) that opens at the top of the vagina.

You need a Pap smear every one to three years if you are 21 to 65 years of age and have been sexually active.

If you are older than 65 and recent Pap smears have been normal, you do not need a Pap smear.

If you have had a total hysterectomy for reasons other than cancer, you do not need a Pap smear.

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