

The bigger purpose of sports physicals

For many families, sports physicals are viewed as one more item to check off before the school year or sports season begins.

But these annual visits are about far more than getting a signature on a form.

A yearly sports physical gives healthcare providers an opportunity to evaluate a young athlete's overall health – physically, mentally and emotionally. From identifying hidden medical concerns to discussing stress, burnout and injuries, these appointments can play an important role in keeping kids healthy both on and off the field.

A chance to catch concerns early

According to Jessica Higgs, MD, primary care managing medical director, Central Region with OSF Medical Group, one of the biggest focuses during a sports physical is heart health.

"A big one we screen for is something called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy," Dr. Higgs says. "It's a change in the way the heart is built that makes it harder for blood to get out of the heart. It can result in sudden death and can be made worse by more activity. The best way to screen it is to have both the parent and student present. Because the parent has some family history that maybe the student doesn't know, so they can say if there are any cardiac issues that run in the family. The kid can also say if they're having any symptoms, and you can put those things together."

During sports physicals, providers also screen for concerns involving the heart, lungs, asthma, previous injuries and concussion history.

"There are some heart conditions that develop as a student goes through puberty and shortly thereafter. These may be things that don't impact them when they're younger but do become an issue when they're playing sports. Sometimes they're more willing to tell the doctor than they are to tell their parent when something is bothering them."

If symptoms or concerns are identified during the visit, additional testing, such as an EKG or imaging, may be recommended.

Sports physicals are required annually for students participating in IESA and IHSA athletics, but Dr. Higgs says students involved in club or travel sports should also continue scheduling yearly visits.

Looking beyond physical health

Sports physicals can also serve as an important annual check-in on a child's mental and emotional well-being.

Balancing academics, practices, travel schedules and pressure to perform can contribute to stress, fatigue and burnout – especially for students playing the same sport year-round.

Dr. Higgs says overuse injuries are common in young athletes who repeatedly use the same muscle groups without enough rest.

"Actually, everyone should take a break. Even if it's just for a couple weeks, but a couple months is even better. Especially if the kid doesn't feel like they enjoy it as much. You can encourage them to take a month or two off and see where they're at."

She also encourages families to support students who want to try different sports and activities.

"The student should play what they really love," Dr. Higgs says, pointing out that if they want to play it year-round, that's fine. But if they want to play a different sport for a certain season, that's fine, too, as it can work a different group of muscles, they can meet new friends and learn new skills.

Most experts, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine, recommend that young athletes play multiple sports and avoid year-round specialization in a single sport until at least age 12, and ideally until ages 15–17.

These appointments also allow students to bring up lingering injuries or concerns they may not feel comfortable discussing elsewhere.

Part of the visit may include one-on-one time between the provider and student, creating an opportunity for more open conversations.

Dr. Higgs says having both the parent and student present during certain parts of the appointment is especially important. Sports physicals include a questionnaire developed alongside the Illinois High School Association (IHSA), and research shows answers are significantly more accurate when both contribute.

Even for children who do not participate in organized sports, yearly wellness visits with a pediatrician or primary care provider remain important for both physical and mental health screenings.

At the end of the day, a sports physical is about much more than eligibility to compete.

It is an opportunity to make sure young athletes are healthy, supported and prepared for success both on and off the field.

Sports physicals can be scheduled with your child's primary care provider. Visit the [OSF HealthCare website](#) to schedule their appointment today.