

Pre-participation Physical Examinations



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Past Medical History

History of any of the following should be made available to the healthcare provider:

- allergy
- allergies to medications
- asthma
- birth defects
- chicken pox
- diabetes
- eating disorders
- glasses/contacts
- heart murmur
- heart problems
- heat problems
- hepatitis
- hernia
- high blood pressure
- kidney disease
- measles
- medications
- menstrual history
- mental disorders
- mononucleosis
- pneumonia
- rheumatic fever
- seizures
- sickle cell trait or disease
- tuberculosis

Sport-Specific History

- Orthopedic injuries (sprains, fractures, dislocations) or surgeries
- Back or neck injuries
- Dental trauma
- Chest pain with exercise
- Feeling faint or having passed out with exercise
- Excessive shortness of breath or fatigue with exercise
- “Burners” or “Stingers” — caused by contact that produces burning pain that moves into the extremity.
- Withheld from participating in a sport for medical reason

Family History

- Heart disease or high blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Unexpected death before the age of 50

Physical Exam

The physical exam will usually consist of the following:

- Pulse rate
- Blood pressure rate
- Height
- Weight
- Vision screening
- Hearing screening

Exam by health-care provider:

- Head — eyes, ears, throat, teeth, neck
- Thorax — heart, lungs, chest wall
- Abdomen — liver, spleen, kidney, intestines
- Genitalia — sexual maturity, testicles, hernias
- Neurological — reflexes, strength, coordination
- Orthopedic — joints, spine, ligaments, tendons, bones (pain, range of motion, strength)

Other exams (laboratory, electrocardiogram, x-rays) may be done at the discretion of the health care provider.

After a thorough history and physical exam, the healthcare provider will make a participation decision by answering the following questions:

- Is there a problem that places the athlete at increased risk of injury?
- Is any other participant at risk of injury because of this problem?
- Can the athlete safely participate with treatment of the problem?
- Can limited participation be allowed while treatment is initiated?
- If clearance is denied for certain activities, in what activities can athlete safely participate?
- Is consultation with another healthcare provider necessary to answer the above questions?

Restriction from participation must be made based upon the best medically objective evidence, and should be determined with the musculoskeletal, cardiac, and aerobic demands of the proposed activity in mind. An understanding of how strenuous the activity is in relation to the physical limitations is crucial. If clearance is denied, recommendations for correction prior to participation should be communicated, and a follow-up evaluation should be scheduled. If acute illnesses or correctable conditions are resolved, clearance should be given.

Each case should be evaluated individually. Understanding the value of participation should guide the practitioner in determining a suitable approach for clearance. Although the PPE may identify health problems or needs not associated with exercise, it should not be used to replace ongoing medical care or routine check-ups with primary care physicians.

The pre-participation physical exam (PPE) is an important step toward safe participation in organized sports. It is important to understand that the purpose of the PPE is not to disqualify or exclude an athlete from competition, but to help maintain the health and safety of the athlete in training and competition. The PPE has the following goals:

- Identify medical and orthopedic problems of sufficient severity to place the athlete at risk for injury or illness.
- Identify correctable problems that may impair the athlete's ability to perform.
- Help maintain the health and safety of the athlete.
- Assess fitness level for specific sports.
- Educate athletes and parents concerning sports, exercise, injuries, and other health-related issues.
- Meet legal and insurance requirements.

Although there is some disagreement among health professionals as to the frequency and timing of the exam, the PPE is generally a formal requirement prior to participation in junior high, high school, college or professional sports, with interim exams done annually if required or indicated. The qualifications of the health-care professional who performs the PPE is based on practitioner availability, clinical expertise, and individual state laws.

The PPE is best done in a medical setting to insure proper equipment and appropriate privacy. However, the large number of athletes involved, limited time for the exam, and deadlines for participation often require the PPE to be done in a format of multiple "stations," with several health-care providers each focusing on their areas of expertise.

The PPE consists of several parts: past medical history, sport-specific history, family history, and physical exam.

For more information on topics for young athletes, or to read the Current Comment, "Pre-participation Physical Examinations," please visit the ACSM Web Site at www.acsm.org.

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