

Information for Patients – Annual Preventive Examinations

We would like to take a moment to explain our philosophy about Annual Exam.

During your visit, we will focus on specific things you should do in order to protect your health. The specific recommendations we have for you will be tailored to your specific situation, depending on your age, gender and specific factors in your health history. We will emphasize those measures – examinations, tests and occasionally medications – which have been proven to provide specific benefits.

In contrast, we generally will not spend much time on unproven tests, exams or other interventions. As a result, there may be certain tests which you have heard recommended in the media (or even from previous physicians) which we may not pursue. Common examples of unproven tests include thyroid test, whole body scans and yearly pap tests in women who have had a hysterectomy. Even a physical exam itself, though traditional, is not proven to provide any actual preventive benefit to patients.

Some patients may wonder why we wouldn't want to do a test ("It's just a test, right, what can it hurt?") But in fact, unproven tests can actually be harmful in a number of ways. For example, x-ray based tests such as CT scans expose a person to a small but potentially significant amount of radiation. Other tests may be harmless in and of themselves but can lead to other harmful procedures. For example, detecting a benign lump on a scan or exam can lead to unnecessary surgery which can have potentially serious complications. Tests can also give a false sense of security or can distract people from pursuing other interventions which do have proven benefit. For example, a whole body scan may miss a colon cancer which would have been found on a proper colonoscopy.

Many preventive measures fall into a gray area, where the benefits are uncertain. Examples of this include mammograms for women under 50 and prostate cancer screening in men. In these cases we can discuss the issues with you and will almost always leave the decision whether to pursue it up to you.