

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

A LOOK AT WHAT A YEARLY PHYSICAL REALLY IS,
HOW TO PREPARE FOR ONE
AND WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU
DON'T HAVE ONE DONE.

By Eric Buttermann

Photography: Todd Langley

Model: Josh Campuzano



FACT:

Millions avoid physicals every year and millions die. Though we can safely say not all are victims of being "physical-challenged," too many are. How many times have you heard "If only we could have caught it early?" Think of the physical as the early bird, the worm as your life and here's how the former keeps the latter wigglin':

A test to prepare for

Most tests in life don't involve getting the questions beforehand, but a physical does. New York-based physician Holly Gilbert believes if more people educated themselves on what an exam is looking for they might prepare for and feel more comfortable doing one. So let's get comfortable with the basics.

Blood pressure is usually the first thing Gilbert checks out. So how do you "pass" this first test? Begin by decreasing the amount of salt you take in. The saltiest foods are your crackers, potato chips, deli meats, pickles—you know, basically everything you love. But since this is really about attacking sodium, if you read the labels for "low sodium" you can still conservatively chomp away, provided you don't add excessive salt to food as a topping.

But it's not just what you put into your body but what you take out of your head. Stress can often be the ultimate pressure cooker. Something as simple as walking to and from work, taking the stairs as opposed to the elevator or even yoga can be a huge stress reduction difference.

The next thing that Gilbert checks is your heart rate. Most people suffer from one that's too high, so another way to lower this besides exercise is through your mental

approach. Anxiety is a major cause of a high pulse, therefore it's important to reflect on what's troubling you and resolve it. "Many a psychologist has lowered a person's pulse, but so has simple meditation," Gilbert says. "Find whatever works for you and go with it."

Finally, height and weight are measured. "While it varies what you should weigh according to muscular make-up," says Gilbert, "by looking at body fat percentage, along with your weight and height, you should have a rough idea. Again, proper exercise and proper diet are what's most likely to help you pass this test."



Head to toe

Believe it or not, a proper physical exam should cover you from head to toe. Gilbert starts by looking you squarely in the eye. "I want to make sure the pupils look good because there's a potential for syphilis if they don't," she says. "I also check your disks, which enables me to know if there's a clot in your brain. This simple test has saved a lot of lives."

The inside of your mouth is a good indicator of not just dental health but cancer. "I check for mouth sores where cancers can easily be hidden and examine the gums as well. Not to 'over-exam' anyone, but you should be going to your dentist at least every six months. Problems in the mouth progress much faster than people anticipate."

Working our way down, the neck is examined for lymph nodes. If present, nodes could mean something as simple as a cold or something as serious as cancer, though Gilbert assures the latter happens rarely. "I just want to make sure the nodes aren't too big, but if they are it's not necessarily the end of the world," she says. The neck is then checked for proper blood flow. Using a stethoscope, what Gilbert is really looking for from this is a sign of a potential stroke. "Sometimes patients think they can check all these things on their own," she says, "but only a doctor can figure this out. There are many people who walk around having had mini-strokes and don't even know it. A physical may be the key to stopping the big one."

Next she checks out the **groin, lungs and even the abdomen** to make sure **the spleen and liver size** are normal. Then, depending on the patient, it may be time for one of the top reasons people don't come in for physicals: the rectal examination. It's an automatic

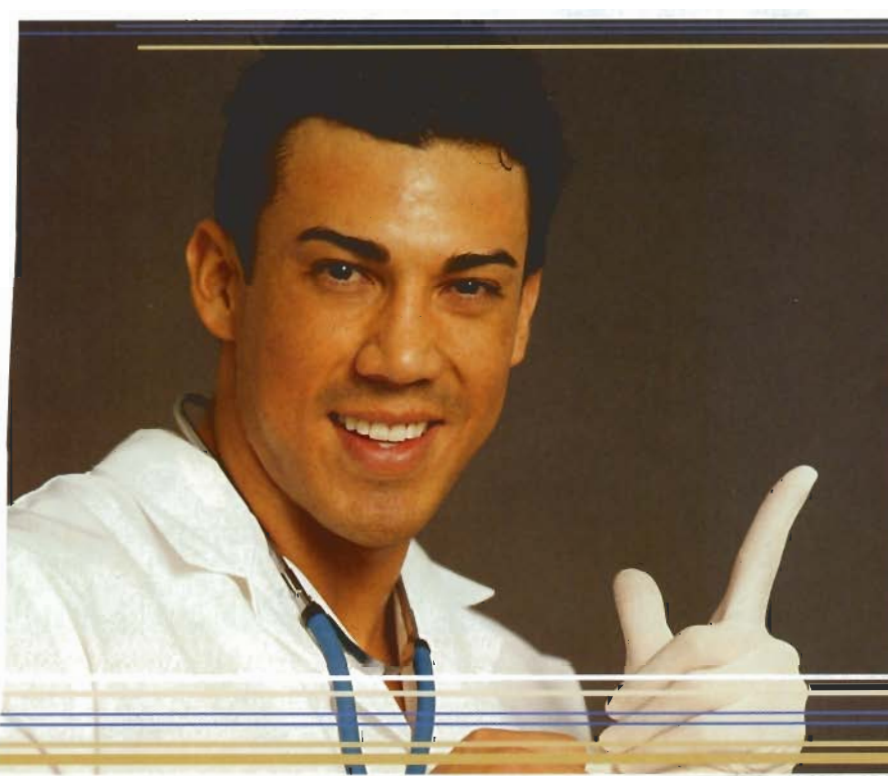
need for any man 40 or over and every woman 50 or over (or the age could be even lower if there have been recent signs of rectal bleeding).

"I know the rectal exam is uncomfortable," Gilbert says, "but when you see what people go through when something is detected late it's worth the discomfort." Gilbert also checks the stool for both men and women of the aforementioned ages to screen for colon cancer, one of the fastest growing killers in this country. Gilbert rounds out the exam by testing for potential skin problems such as moles and then does a neurological exam. This involves tapping the reflexes, testing people's muscle strength and watching them walk—you know, usual first date stuff.

Oral exam

One of the most vital parts of an exam is just sitting down and talking. "Finding out the history of a patient can be very important to what we look for when we do the physical," Gilbert says. Examples of what she'll ask are **what medications the person takes, if they've had past medical or surgical problems and particularly about their heredity.**

In addition, Gilbert will review lifestyle choices,



We all hate
this part
of the exam,
but it could
save your life.

such as whether the patient drinks or smokes (she'll lecture them on stopping the latter if they do) and will ask about the frequency of sexual relations to see whether they should have hepatitis shots. She'll also run down whether they've had chicken pox and inoculations for measles, German measles, tuberculosis and tetanus (the last needed once every 10 years). Lab tests are also necessary for early detection of problems. Among the things tested are anemia, electrolyte testing (i.e., for unusual levels of sodium, calcium and potassium) and blood sugar.

Get physical at home

Maybe you're most important physical will be the one you give yourself, Gilbert says. Breast and testicular cancer are two leading killers and can be detected by self-examination. Here are the correct ways to perform these self-exams on yourself. (Note: To do a breast exam a woman should make sure to wait until

after her period because of the hormonal changes that occur before and during menstruation.)

Women: Lift the arm of the corresponding breast and with the other hand start at the outer edge of the breast and make little circles in a pattern next to one another. You should gently be feeling the breast tissue under the fingers, not pressing too hard to feel bone and not so soft as to not feel anything. Spiral in these small circular motions until you reach the nipples.


Men: For a testicular exam, a man should take the testicle in his hands and feel all around it, almost like gently squeezing a ball. You are feeling for anything unusual—new lumps, bumps, etc. But if you feel something, don't panic, says Gilbert. "Most of the time it turns out to be nothing," she says. "Regardless, this is the best way to alert yourself if it is something."

Finding the right doctor is the first step.



Why don't we go?

Gilbert understands why people don't want to get physicals and would like to put their fears to rest. "Many people simply don't go because they're afraid of what they may find out," she says. "They have to understand that diseases don't go away by ignoring them. They go away by treating them."

Gilbert also cites poor bedside manner as a leading cause of going without a physical. "It's important to find a doctor you have a good relationship with," she says. "A lot of the time patients are afraid to bring things up to their doctor because that physician's attitude may not be conducive to discussing a situation. This makes the patient feel worse emotionally than when they went in. Remember, the first test should be testing for the right doctor." 



Killing the diseases that kill

Diabetes: While Type 1 Diabetes is unavoidable, Type 2 diabetes is a direct result of being overweight. The misconception is that ingesting sugar causes diabetes, but it's all about the calories so keep yours in check.

Heart disease: Keep cholesterol low by checking labels. Trade in your eggs for egg whites and your fatty foods for low-fat or fat-free.

Breast cancer: If a woman is over 40 she needs to have a yearly mammogram and self-test monthly.

Testicular cancer: All men should check their testicles monthly for anything irregular.

AIDS: While the best thing you can do is keep your pants on, the worst thing you can do is have sex without a condom. There is a misconception that this disease has become "dormant" or is a "homosexual disease."
Fact: If you have sex, you can get it.

