

## **School Physicals**

Women's Edition Magazine

To Your Good News - August 1999

By Diana L. Criser

Off in the distance, little Tommy Touchdown comes running over the hill, football pads hanging over one shoulder, his cleats in his hand. When he reaches the football field, he sees the coach hold out his hand and say, "Whoa there, Tommy! You can't play today! I haven't received your sports physical form yet!"

A look of disappointment and despair washes over little Tommy's face; his hopes of playing football this season are dashed before his eyes.

Don't look now, but back-to-school time is upon us again. Time to trade in beach towels for text books. Time to shop for new clothes and school supplies. Time for school and sports physicals.

Although most schools require a physical at the beginning of the school year or for participation in sports, requirements vary widely between states, cities, school districts, and even the schools themselves. If the school provides a health examination form, ensure your physician fills it out completely. An incomplete form may invalidate the physical.

Back-to-school time is hectic, but be careful not to rush the exam. A routine physical can take at least an hour. Here's what to expect during your child's physical.

First, a nurse will review your child's immunization history. Prior to attending kindergarten, recommended vaccinations include a total of live DTPs (diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis), four HIBs (influenza), four polios, 2 MMRs (measles, mumps, rubella), and one varicella (chicken pox). Immunizations can be very expensive.

The child who is not covered by insurance can receive vaccinations at most county hospitals for a reduced rate, allowing for more children to be protected from these dangerous diseases.

Prior to attending seventh grade, a child is required to have an additional varicella inoculation, and a Td (tetanus and diphtheria) booster. An additional Td booster should be received every ten years. Many times, students heading off to college are given their next Td booster, even if it has not been exactly ten years since their last injection, and some colleges may require additional inoculations. If your child is about to go off to college, especially out of state, be sure to check with the school for additional immunization requirements.

Many states also require the Hepatitis B series of vaccines prior to children

entering kindergarten. In the past, this series of immunizations was only required for health care workers, but due to the seriousness of this disease, which is transmitted through contaminated blood and leads to liver damage, it is now recommended for the entire population, and can be received at any age. The vaccine is a series of three injections, the second one received one month after the first, and the third received five months later.

Once the child's immunization record has been verified, the physical exam begins with height and weight measurements, temperature, blood pressure and heart rate checks. A basic vision screening is usually performed, with and without corrective lenses. If a deficiency is found, a visit to an optometrist is recommended. If the school requires a hearing screening, the child is given a set of headphones to wear, and sounds at increasing decibels are piped into each ear. The child raises either the left or right hand, depending on which side the sound is heard, identifying the frequencies of the child's hearing.

The nurse will also take a health history, recording any medical conditions which the school should be aware of. Documentation of certain health issues such as asthma or diabetes will help the school personnel be able to care for your student in the event of an emergency.

Basic lab work is also performed by the nursing staff, such as urinalysis and CBC (complete blood count). These tests alert the medical staff to conditions such as infections and anemia.

At this time, your child will be seen by the physician who will review all medical records and test results, and make any necessary recommendations for follow-up by a specialist. The doctor also completes a full head-to-toe physical examination, including nutritional status; normal growth and development; ear, nose and throat; heart and lungs; and a neurological exam.

Most examination forms require the physician to answer questions relating to the child's participation in normal school activities and sports, and to list any restrictions due to health issues. Not all forms include these questions, but it is important to inform the physician of any important health issues pertaining to your child.

If your child does suffer from a chronic condition, such as cystic fibrosis or diabetes, he or she may still be able to participate in sports and other activities with special instructions from your physician. Work with your child's doctor and the school to determine if special consideration can be made for your child.

Going back to school is a busy time for both children and parents, and annual physical examinations are an important part of your child's wellness program. Prevention is always the best medicine, but catching an illness early can also save your child's life. Anticipate the time required for a thorough physical, and schedule enough time around other requirements to allow for a complete exam. Prepare any questions and concerns you have for your child's doctor prior to the visit; no

one knows your child better than you do, and you will catch changes in diet or sleeping habits before others will. Play an active role in your child's health care, so he or she will grow up understanding the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

Little Tommy's mother opens her eyes; it had only been a dream! All of her children had visited the doctor earlier that day, and completed the school and sports physical examinations and forms! With a new peace of mind, she rolls over and goes back to sleep, dreaming of little Tommy Touchdown in the Super Bowl.