

UW Health: Urges families to schedule sports physicals now

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MADISON, Wis. – Experts with UW Health are encouraging young athletes to schedule their pre-participation sports physical exams with their primary care provider now to avoid a last-minute scramble before the start of school sports this summer.

Pre-participation physical exams have long been used in the United States to detect conditions that predispose the athlete to injury or illness. The exam, which typically includes a review of health history and examination of the cardiovascular and musculoskeletal systems, are required by the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA) before athletes are allowed to participate in high school sports. Failure to complete the required exam on time can prevent athletes from starting their sport.

But according to Dr. David Bernhardt, pediatrician and sports medicine physician at UW Health, athletes should approach these exams with more than just sports in mind. He says routine sports physicals, though useful, are too narrow in focus and can sometimes neglect other issues that could be critically important to a high schooler's wellbeing.

"Pre-participation physicals are a great opportunity for high schoolers to have a more comprehensive well visit with their primary care provider," said Bernhardt. "Sports physicals are often the only time that adolescents schedule time with their pediatrician outside of visits for injuries or illness, so it makes sense that we use this time to evaluate these kids for more than just their readiness to engage in sports. There are many other topics that we should be discussing, like mental health, which can be just as important to a child's short- and long-term wellbeing."

Bernhardt says athletes should always go to their primary care provider for these exams because it ensures continuity of care and allows the athlete's physician to identify changes over time and react appropriately. He also says physical exams that are performed in retail-based clinics or in schools often lack privacy, which can make it less likely for adolescents to disclose private or potentially embarrassing concerns during the exam.