



RICK D'ELIA

"As pediatricians, we are into preventative care," said Gerald Golner, founding pediatrician at Phoenix Pediatrics. "We just want to be sure that nothing is awry." Here, Dr. Golner examines a model patient, Angel Berrera, 5, of Phoenix.

Preparing for a Healthy School Year

Annual checkups recommended

BY ALISON STANTON

For most families, the start of a new school year involves new clothes, snazzy backpacks and plenty of school supplies. Sounds good, but pediatricians want to remind parents that getting children ready for school involves more than buying a plethora of pencils, paper and the perfect pair of pants — it should also involve a comprehensive physical exam.

Summer is good timing

"Most school districts require some form of an annual evaluation of school-aged children," said Howard Podolsky, M.D., chief medical officer for NextCare Urgent Care, adding that scheduling the appointment during the latter part of summer vacation is a great idea. "First of all, it's very important that we make sure kids are up-to-date on vaccines," he said. "Second, schools like to have healthy children in school because healthy children learn better than unhealthy children."

Gerald Golner, M.D., founding pediatrician at Phoenix Pediatrics, agrees, noting that in years past, it was common for kids to have an annual checkup around the time of their birthdays. However, he feels that the weeks leading up to when school starts can be an even better time to visit the doctor. "Pediatricians love to do these appointments during the summer," he said. "There are less infectious diseases going around and we have more time."

In addition to checking the child's general health, Podolsky said the back-to-school checkup is a perfect time to "gently remind" the

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family not to forget about routine dental care, as well as to assess the child's vision and hearing. "A lot of kids do not realize that they need to squint to see the chalkboard," he said. "If need be, we can refer them to an optometrist or ophthalmologist for further evaluation."

Along with unnoticed vision difficulties, Golner said that he has seen an increase in hearing damage in teens caused by using earbuds with the volume too loud. "You think about noise damage to your ears as being from things like firing weapons or rock concerts," he said. "But I just had a patient who had irreversible hearing loss and that's what it was from."

While conducting a well-child visit, Kristine Sarna, M.D., a family practice physician at Norterra Family Medicine in Phoenix, likes to touch base with both the child and parents on nutrition since she knows going back to school can mean less-than-healthy lunches. "I like to ask if they are getting their five servings of fruits

and vegetables a day," she said. "I'll also talk to them about why soda is not good for you." She added that most insurance plans will typically cover what she calls a "head to toe" annual checkup for kids.

If your child plans on participating in sports, most, if not all, schools will require a sports physical. Usually, everything can be taken care of in one visit by combining the sports physical with a comprehensive physical exam and any needed vaccinations.

Checking-in at a checkup

An annual checkup is also an ideal time to check in with adolescents, who are often reluctant to go to the doctor. "The biggest challenge is getting adolescents into the office, but if you are doing it because they need vaccinations for school or need a sports physical, then it's a great time to check for other issues like scoliosis," Golner said.

"A little health-care prevention at the beginning of the year can pay off big with healthy kids who are ready to learn and do their best in school."



"When we do a sports physical, we pay attention to the heart and also check for any asthma or allergies."

—Kristine Sarna, M.D., Norterra Family Medicine