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## **What is an Annual Wellness Visit and Why is it Important?**

If you or your loved one are 65 years or older, you may have heard about Medicare's free benefit called the Annual Wellness Visit. Here are some things you need to know and what to expect during your Annual Wellness Visit.

### **What is the Annual Wellness Visit?**

The Annual Wellness Visit is NOT a physical. Rather, it is a conversation between you and your doctor to discuss your health history and any concerns you may have regarding your health, and to review your medications and immunizations. It also is a time when you and your doctor review your existing health problems; determine what health issues may become a concern in the future and how to prevent them.

The goals of an Annual Wellness Visit are to create a complete personal and family health history and to help prevent future health problems.

### **What to Bring to Your Annual Wellness Visit**

- A list of all of your medications, including vitamins and supplements
- Names of all of your healthcare providers, including doctors, pharmacists, therapists, home health agencies, and non-traditional providers
- Your immunization records, including flu or pneumonia shots

HIPPA laws prevent physicians from sharing information about you with one another without your permission. This is why it is important to bring this information with you to your Annual Wellness Visit, particularly if you see multiple healthcare providers.

### **What to Expect**

The Annual Wellness Visit is performed either by your physician, a nurse or a nurse practitioner. You can expect your provider to discuss with you your health history,

medications, healthcare team, and immunization schedule. Other components of the Annual Wellness Visit are a Health Risk Assessment, a Wellness Schedule, Advance Directives, and a Personal Health Record.

## **Your Health History**

The AWV begins with your doctor collecting your family and personal health history. Your physician may have most of this information, but it is important to provide information that is not in your records to ensure that your health history is correct and complete.

## **Medication Review**

Your doctor will review your list of medications, including those prescribed by other physicians, to ensure that there are no negative interactions. This is a good time to ask questions you may have about your medications.

## **Your Healthcare Team**

Your provider will create a comprehensive list of your healthcare team for future reference.

## **Immunization Schedule**

Your doctor will review your immunizations and determine if you need additional vaccines.

## **Health Risk Assessment**

A Health Risk Assessment includes your weight, height and blood pressure. You will be asked such questions as your ability to care for yourself, your memory, whether or not you are depressed, and your smoking and drinking habits. The purpose is to determine if you are at risk for future illnesses. Once the Health Risk Assessment is completed, your doctor may recommend screenings in the event some concerns arose during the assessment. These screenings will be performed during a separate visit, and possibly with another physician, depending on the type of screening. Your doctor is required to tell you if the screening requires a co-pay.

## **The Wellness Schedule**

Medicare requires physicians to provide a Wellness Schedule to patients during the Annual Wellness Visit. The Wellness Schedule is a list of all of the screenings you should have during the next five-to-10 years. These screenings can include prostate exams, mammograms and heart-related screenings. Many of these are free to the patient.

### **Advance Directives**

While physicians are no longer required to give their patients information on Advance Directives - or Living Wills - you can discuss your wishes with your doctor and ask about the procedures you need to follow to complete an Advance Directive. Your physician should be able to provide a standard form for you to complete.

### **Personal Health Record**

All of the information collected during your Annual Wellness Visit is compiled into one document called a Personal Health Record. You can obtain a copy of your Personal Health Record from your physician. It is a great tool to use when you have to go to the hospital, see other doctors, or visit small clinics. Since healthcare providers are not allowed to discuss your health situation with other providers, the Personal Health Record helps ensure that all of your healthcare providers have your complete health history.

It also can be very helpful to your adult children to have a copy of your Personal Health Record in the event they need to represent you at the hospital or emergency room.

### **Be Your Own Advocate**

The Annual Wellness Visit gives you and your doctor a complete picture of your health and what you need to do to be healthier. The more you know about your health, the more likely you are to be your own advocate. So, schedule your Annual Wellness Visit, have a great conversation with your doctor and stay healthy!

By Charles Smith, RN, BSN

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