



What to Expect During a Physical Exam

Patient Rights & Resources



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Physical exams are an important part of a provider's delivery of preventative care and diagnostic process. While medical professionals receive extensive training in a variety of hands-on techniques commonly used during physical exams, you have the right to ask your provider what they are doing and why at any time.

Common Physical Examination Techniques:

- **Inspection:** The provider carefully assesses the patient, looking for normal conditions and irregularities. The provider may lightly hold, turn, or adjust the part of the body they are examining.
- **Palpation:** Touching a patient to feel for abnormalities. Areas of the body commonly examined include the neck, chest, and abdomen.
- **Percussion:** Tapping on a patient's body, either with fingers, hands, or small instruments, to produce sound vibrations that can confirm the presence of air, fluid, and solids, as well as organ characteristics.
- **Auscultation:** Listening to the heart, lungs, neck, or abdomen using a stethoscope.

Your Rights During a Physical Examination

During a physical exam, you have the right to know what physical contact may occur and why. Your provider should:

- Request your consent before any exam.
- Give professional explanations about each component.
- Communicate their actions in advance.
- Respect your privacy while you dress or undress and provide a gown.
- Perform the minimum amount of physical contact required for diagnosis and treatment.
- Have a chaperone present during sensitive exams and anytime when requested.
- Utilize draping to minimize your exposure.
- Offer chances for you to ask questions or raise concerns.

If your provider's actions make you feel uncomfortable or unsure, you have the right to take the following actions:

- Tell your provider to stop the exam or that you need a break. For example, you may use firm language and hold up your hands to indicate "stop."
- Ask for an explanation of what the provider is doing/will do.
- Ask to transfer your care to another provider.

Types of Physical Exams

During any exam, your health care provider should tell you exactly what they are doing at each step so that nothing comes as a surprise to you. Additional components may be included and appropriate based on medical history, symptoms, or abnormal findings.

Sports Physical Exam: Your provider will ask about medical history, ability to exercise in different situations, and prior injuries; perform a physical exam; check your heart, lungs, and abdomen; and evaluate your posture, joints, and flexibility. A sensitive exam is not included in a typical sports physical.

Well Child and Adolescent Exams: In order to track healthy growth and development, the exam will include looking at the chest/breasts and genitalia. For females, palpation of the breasts is generally not necessary. For males, a testicular exam is performed by palpating the testicle to make sure placement and check for lumps or hardening. No pelvic or rectal exam is required routinely.

Gynecological Exam: A gynecological exam may include a breast and/or pelvic exam, as well as a pap smear depending on your age and risk.

Breast Exam: Your provider will use the pads of their fingers to check the entire breast, including the underarm and collarbone. If they spot a lump, they will note features and check whether it moves.

Pelvic Exam: Your provider will examine your reproductive organs. This is not recommended for patients under 21 unless medical history or symptoms indicate a need. You will be asked to take off your underwear and lie at the end of the table with your feet in stirrups and a sheet covering your stomach and legs. A pelvic exam may include:

- **External Exam:** Your provider visually inspects the area outside of the vagina.
- **Bimanual Exam:** Your provider inserts two gloved, lubricated fingers into your vagina and feels both your uterus and ovaries while placing pressure on the lower part of your belly with the other hand. This may cause pressure or some discomfort but should not be painful.
- **Pap Test:** Your provider inserts a speculum (a small medical tool) into the vagina and gently opens to see the vaginal canal and cervix. They will insert a sterile swab in your vagina and gently scrape your cervix to obtain a cell sample. This test may be uncomfortable.
- **Rectal Exam:** Your provider may also perform a rectal exam by inserting a gloved and lubricated finger into your rectum to check for tenderness or other irregularities.

Physical Exams: Your provider will examine your genitals, including the penis, testicles, and scrotum. They may ask you to cough while examining the groin to help check for inguinal hernias.

- **Digital Rectal Exam:** You will be asked to take off your underwear and provided a gown or cloth to cover yourself. You will either stand and bend forward at the waist or lie on your side in the fetal position on a table. Your provider will gently insert a gloved, lubricated finger into the rectum to check for tenderness/irregularities. They will inspect the prostate and wall of the lower colon or rectum. The exam may be uncomfortable but should not be painful and is brief.

Recognizing Misconduct

Any instance of a health care professional initiating sexual contact in the context of a medical exam is highly inappropriate and a violation of medical ethics. This includes the suggestion that sexual contact is necessary or beneficial to the patient's health and any sexual contact that occurs while a patient is incapacitated.

Because of the inherent position of trust and power afforded to medical professionals, a patient cannot give consent to a sexual interaction. This is true even when the patient suggests a sexual relationship or accepts a provider's invitation to begin one. In rare circumstances, it may also be hard to spot "grooming" behavior.

Examples of "Red Flag" inappropriate behavior include:

- Telling sexual jokes.
- Lingering stares or glances at a patient's sexual body parts.
- Divulging information about the provider's love life or sexual preferences.
- Offering gifts or favors.
- Contacting patients for non-medical reasons.
- Attempting to schedule appointments outside of typical office hours or away from their practice.
- Inviting patients to lunch or other "date-like" activities.

Serious examples of inappropriate behavior include:

- Asking for details about the patient's sexual experiences or preferences without valid medical reason.
- Deliberately watching a patient dress or undress.
- Inappropriate comments about or to the patient, such as sexualizing a patient's body or underclothing, or sexualized/sexually demeaning comments to a patient.
- Performing genital/rectal exams without gloves or medical need.
- Touching the patient in a way that seems sexual, such as groping/touching of sexual body parts.
- Kissing, oral to genital contact, or other sexual contact.

Medical Chaperones

Medical chaperones are used during intimate physical exams and other patient interactions to serve as a witness to the events taking place should there be any misunderstanding or concern for misconduct. The presence of a trained chaperone can provide reassurance about the professional context and content of the exam and the intent of the provider.

The OMB recommends all physicians and physician assistants have a trained chaperone physically present for all breast, genital, and rectal exams. You may request a medical chaperone if one is not offered by your provider. Starting July 1, 2023, physicians and physician assistants must offer to make a trained medical chaperone available for these exams.



Sexual Trauma Support

Resources available to you:

- oregonsatf.org/help-for-survivors
Oregon Attorney General's Sexual Assault Task Force, information for nonprofits in your area
- RAINN.org (Spanish: RAINN.org/es)
24/7 online chat for [RAINN](https://RAINN.org) (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization
- **800-656-HOPE (4673)**
National Sexual Assault Hotline



Filing a Report to the Board

The Oregon Medical Board takes accusations of sexual misconduct extremely seriously. Reporting a provider's inappropriate behavior during an exam (be it their demeanor, words, or actions) is the best way to fully address and resolve the issue.

To file a report with the Board, visit omb.oregon.gov/investigations to complete the Complaint Form, or submit a letter to the Board that includes the following information:

- The full name of the provider.
- The patient's name, mailing address, phone number, and date of birth. If you are not the patient, provide your contact information.
- A description of the incident, including the date(s) when it happened and where (clinic, doctor's office, etc.). Please provide as much detail as possible.
- If any other providers treated the patient before or after the incident, please include their name.

Written complaints should be mailed to:

Oregon Medical Board, Investigations Manager
1500 SW 1st Ave. #620
Portland, OR 97201

If you have questions, contact the Board's Complaint Resource Staff at complaintresource@omb.oregon.gov. You may also call **971-673-2702** (toll free: **877-254-6263**). **Emails are not confidential; do not submit complaint information via email.**

Notice of Confidentiality

ORS 676.175 requires information provided to the Board be kept confidential. The information gathered during investigations will not be generally available to the public. This means that the specifics of the investigation cannot be publicly shared, including the complainant or patient names. If a violation is found and the Board issues an Order, the Order is public information. Public Orders are available at omb.oregon.gov/verify or by request. Persons who file a complaint or provide information during an investigation and do so in good faith are protected and are not subject to an action for civil damages for providing information per ORS 677.335 and 677.425.