

MHSA Position Statement on Two-Year Pre-Participation Physical Examinations (PPE) for High School Athletes

The Montana High School Association (MHSA), upon approval from its member schools, has updated its policy on Pre-participation Physical Examinations (PPE), requiring physical exams every two years rather than annually.

This change aligns with recommendations from leading medical authorities such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine (AMSSM), and the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), who assert that annual physicals are unnecessary for most healthy high school athletes. For athletes without significant health changes, a biennial exam is sufficient. The AAP supports this two-year cycle, recommending comprehensive exams every two years, with annual updates on any relevant changes in health status.

In addition to these medical recommendations, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) supports the biennial approach, recognizing that a two-year cycle is adequate for monitoring most student-athletes, especially those in good health.

The MHSA Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC) also emphasizes the benefits of a biennial exam in reducing the strain on medical providers, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Annual physical exams often place a burden on providers and create bottlenecks in scheduling. Reducing the frequency of PPEs allows providers to focus on more detailed and individualized care. The MHSA and the SMAC also stress the importance of continuity of care and encourage athletes to continue to visit their primary care physician during the years the PPE is not required.

The MHSA further recommends that Pre-participation Physical Examinations be conducted in conjunction with a student's annual well-child visit with their primary care provider. This approach supports comprehensive and coordinated care, ensuring that the provider who knows the student's full medical and developmental history can address both athletic readiness and overall health. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) guidelines emphasize the value of annual preventive visits throughout adolescence to monitor growth, mental health, immunization status, and emerging risk factors—areas that extend beyond the scope of a traditional sports physical. Conducting the PPE within the context of the annual well-child exam helps eliminate redundant visits, strengthens the medical home relationship, and promotes continuity of care while maintaining compliance with MHSA requirements. In addition, most health insurance plans cover annual well-child visits as part of preventive care benefits, meaning there is typically no additional out-of-pocket cost for families when combining the PPE with this visit.

This policy change also reduces the need for mass physical events, which have historically been used to meet the annual PPE requirement. These group sessions often lack the personal attention necessary for a thorough assessment of each athlete's health.

By requiring exams every two years, the MHSA ensures better continuity of care and more thorough health assessments for student-athletes. This update reflects a balanced approach, informed by current medical research and national recommendations, and aims to improve the overall health and safety of Montana's athletes.

The MHSA remains committed to supporting the health and well-being of student-athletes, and this policy change is an important step in that ongoing commitment.