

Why your newborn needs well child checkups

By Marina Hansen

Welcoming a baby into the world is one of life's greatest experiences. While it is largely full of bonding and making memories as a new family, it can also be nerve wracking. Caring for a newborn brings up many questions about what is normal and what warrants further evaluation. Regularly scheduled appointments with your baby's doctor give you the opportunity to ask these questions.

Well child checkups are an integral part of your newborn's wellness. During the first year of life, infants grow and change constantly. Their skills and needs are very different in the first few weeks of life than they are at four months, eight months or 12 months. During each unique stage, your child will benefit from activities tailored to their developmental needs.

At each well child check, you will get a printout of what to expect in the coming months. Your child's doctor will provide recommendations for keeping your child safe, what they should be eating and how much sleep they need. Being in tune with your baby's current stage of development will allow you to engage with your baby in meaningful ways as they discover and explore the world.

Safety precautions will also be reviewed. Parents will need to focus on different areas of safety based on the infant's skills at the time. For example, when a child starts to crawl, it is important to put up gates, keep small items that could be choking hazards off the floor, place locks on cabinets and to secure cleaning supplies and other potential hazards.

Regularly scheduled well child visits coincide with the recommended immunization schedule. It is important for infants to stay up to date on vaccines. They were developed to prevent serious and often fatal illnesses. Many decades of research have gone into creating and updating vaccines. Before vaccines were invented, many diseases, such as polio, measles and whooping cough (pertussis), caused illness, paralysis and death in children. We are blessed to live in a time where science can prevent those devastating outcomes.

During well child exams, we screen for developmental, speech and cognitive delays. Early intervention is the most important factor in resolving delays. Doctors are experts at identifying potential delays and then referring the child to needed interventions and therapies. By appropriately addressing any areas of concern at an early age, you are helping your child reach their full potential. The healthcare that babies receive will have a lasting, positive impact on their schooling, work and interactions with the world.

Regular well child visits allow the caregiver and child to develop a relationship with the child's primary care physician. When a child gets sick and needs urgent care visits, knowing the doctor can make the appointment less scary for the child and caregiver.

Overall, well child checks help ensure your child's health starts off on the right foot. These checkups are a time to ask questions, stay up to date on immunizations, review safety precautions, discuss feeding and sleep needs for your infant and get guidance on what child development to anticipate in the coming months.

Marina Hansen, MD, a family physician at RiverStone Health Clinics, can be reached at 406-247-3306.