

Ohio State Survey: 3 in 10 Young Adults Don't Have a Doctor; Most Rarely See One

Skipped doctor appointments can mean missed screenings, delayed care and more ER use



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Key takeaways

- A national poll of 1,006 adults found only 71% of people ages 18-29 have a primary care doctor, compared with 97% of adults 65 and older.
- Among young adults who do have a primary care provider, fewer than half said they had a checkup in the past year.
- Physicians say annual visits help catch overdue vaccines, screenings and other health issues early, while directing patients to the right level of care.

A new survey commissioned by [The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center](#) finds young adults are missing out on the health benefits of having a primary care doctor.

The national poll of 1,006 adults found only 71% of adults ages 18-29 have a primary care doctor compared with 97% of adults age 65 and older. Among younger adults who do have a doctor, only 47% have had a checkup in the past year.

"Having a primary care doctor is especially important when we're young," said [Zachary Bittinger, MD](#), family medicine physician and clinical assistant professor in the [Department of Family and Community Medicine](#). "We look ahead five years, 10 years and 20 years, because that's ideally how long you see your primary care doctor. That kind of relationship means that for each stage of life, from college to raising children to retirement, you get the kind of advice that keeps you safe."

What happens during an annual physical exam?

Building the patient-doctor relationship can start with an annual physical exam. It's a routine checkup and a chance to discuss health issues and preventive care. Patients will answer questions about their health history and have a physical exam. The physical exam may include the following:

- Check vital signs like temperature, pulse and breathing rate
- Measure height, weight and blood pressure
- Listen to heart and lungs
- Look at mouth and ears
- Examine skin
- Feel lymph nodes
- Check for swelling in arms and legs

Based on the answers to the questions and the physical exam, the doctor may order blood tests to check blood sugar and cholesterol levels. The doctor will review the medical history and may recommend health screenings and vaccinations.

“My young, healthy patients might be the picture of health but they might not know they're behind on their tetanus shot because it's been 10 years,” Bittinger said. “They might not know that it's time for their first Pap test. There are lots of things that crop up that we see coming in primary care from a long way away.”

Where do young adults seek non-emergency care?

When a health issue that is not an emergency arises, young adults turn to urgent care clinics. The survey shows 36% will seek out an urgent care clinic first, while 68% of older adults will contact their primary care provider.

“It's often best to start with your primary care doctor to decide the ideal place to seek care,” Bittinger said. “If it's a small problem, we may steer you to urgent care. If it's a medium problem, we can prioritize seeing you. If it's a bigger problem, you may end up in the emergency room.”

Seeing a primary care doctor is associated with better health outcomes, fewer hospital stays and less emergency department use.

What is the survey methodology?

This study was conducted by SSRS on its Opinion Panel Omnibus platform. The SSRS Opinion Panel Omnibus is a national, twice-per-month, probability-based survey. Data collection was conducted from May 1 – 3, 2026, among a sample of 1,006 respondents. The survey was conducted via web (n=976) and telephone (n=30) and administered in English. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-3.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. All SSRS Opinion Panel Omnibus data are weighted to represent the target population of U.S. adults ages 18 or older.

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