

Upgrade Your Physical



By Gretchen Kalwinski

Too many hard-working executives prioritize their business over their health. To counter this tendency, some companies are offering executive physicals as a smart perk to management. These exams pack myriad appointments into just one day, so execs can minimize the time they'd spend waiting in doctor's offices—and get back to their critical tasks.

There are several high-profile executive physical offerings in the Chicago area. Northwestern Memorial Hospital's program includes five internists plus exercise physiologists and a dietician. According to Medical Director Dr. Lorrie Elliott, they offer a spectrum of specialists—from dermatologists to neurosurgeons.

The process begins four to six weeks ahead of the visit, when an internist talks with each patient for 30 minutes.

"This is to get to know the patient and determine their concerns," Elliott says. "When they come in, it's a full day pre-scheduled."

So what typically happens during that day?

"First, we do comprehensive blood work," Elliott says. "We measure body fat percentage in a machine called the 'bod pod,' which is highly accurate in terms of determining body fat percentage—so you can know if your BMI is high because you're Sylvester Stallone...or not."

They may do a hearing and vision screening; then patients spend an hour with an internist.

"We're trying to get a patient snapshot," Elliott says, "and think how their care is encompassing stress management, sleep, exercise, diet and relationships."

Northwestern also encourages patients to meet with an exercise physiologist and dietician for consults on living a healthy, active life. The physicals have two other slots that can be used for additional testing, such as mammograms.

Elliott says patients often use this exam not only to get their "annual tune up" (i.e., their yearly skin-check exam), but for appointments they haven't been able to squeeze into their schedule.

"Some will say 'My knee has been bothering me for months but I haven't had a chance to get in,'" she says. "This is a good opportunity to get it done."

At day's end, internists go over results with patients for 30-60 minutes. Each is given a snapshot of where they are health-wise, along with a roadmap and customized plan for improvement.

"No one just wants to hear, 'Exercise and eat more vegetables,'" Elliott says. "It's better to say, 'Instead of Cheerios, try one of these higher-fiber cereals and frozen blueberries.' Actionable steps help change behaviors and improve long-term health."

Patients can touch base anytime over the following year to ask for more recommendations around exercise or brain-training. "We really want to have that relationship, to help keep them progressing down the path," Elliott says.

The amenities are plentiful. Patients get their own suite with a bathroom so they can work, shower, or check emails during downtime. They have assistants who escort them to appointments and they are given a healthy breakfast and lunch that models what their meals should look like.

"Basically," Elliott says, "we give them the amenities available in a high-end hotel."

Prices vary according to what the company sponsors. Some companies cover everything; others cover part, but send a portion to insurance. There can also be a portion not paid by insurance, which is sent to the corporation or the individual.

Executive Medical Services of Chicago, helmed by Dr. Robert Noven, offers a different approach. Noven, the former medical director at Northwestern Executive Health, says these physicals are an efficient way for people to get a comprehensive checkup that isn't rushed.

"Nowadays, you've got the 10-minute physical—after a 45-minute wait. To me, that's not acceptable," Noven says.

His program includes elements that go beyond a physical exam. He focuses on the long-term patient relationship. Noven prides himself on carefully considering which testing to order, and being cost-conscious.

"What I'm doing now is more of a pay-as-you-go model. People pay according to how much time they need, and I don't order what's unnecessary. I do lab testing at a dramatically reduced price."

Noven's typical patient is someone 50-60 years old. "Unfortunately," he says, "most business leaders are male, so they're usually men who've been working too hard and aren't monitoring their health."

Because Noven's program doesn't have bells and whistles – for example, no meals or spa services – his prices tend to be lower than others. He offers a comprehensive history and physical examination for a \$210 flat fee and can include other testing, (EKG, audiogram) for \$25 each. He can expedite tests and referrals through Northwestern.

"I try to avoid unnecessary items that look nice but increase the price without adding value," Noven says. "And I keep in touch with patients through ongoing email communication."

Simplicity helps Noven keep costs down. "It is really an older model of a comprehensive physical," he says. "The costs are transparent and the relationship is between me and the patient. That relationship is the extra value my practice provides."

The Mayo Clinic's executive health program has been around longer than most. According to Dr. Robert Orford, who has been at the Arizona location since 1972, it unofficially launched in the 1920s as Mayo developed the first large group practice in the United States. It soon brought in patients from Chicago and California and began servicing such luminaries as Henry Ford. Around 1970, the executive physical became an official offering.

Orford's program sees about 3,700 patients annually and he says its main purpose is allowing patients to move rapidly through the medical system.

Blood testing is done first, then x-rays, if needed. Then, the patient has consultations depending on their needs. If they have a condition like diabetes they'll see an endocrinologist or cardiologist. If they're over 50, they'll usually undergo a colonoscopy.

"It's everything you'd do as part of a general examination," Orford says, "but done very quickly."

Mayo's patients tend to be about half corporate executives and half professional service providers, such as attorneys and accountants. They come from all over the world: More than 40 percent of patients are in-state; 50 percent are from other U.S. states, and about 10 percent are international.

Mayo's ability to offer expedited exams can be crucial if a time-sensitive issue is found.

"A man came in and I found a mass in his testicle," Orford says. "I arranged for an ultrasound that morning and brought in a urologist. It turned out he had testicular cancer, and I was able to clear him for surgery the very next morning."

These comprehensive exams aren't just a breath of fresh air for patients, but for physicians, too.

"It's nice to be able to sit down and talk to people and help them with lifestyle changes instead of rushing from patient to patient," Northwestern Memorial's Elliott says. "I find it really rewarding."



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