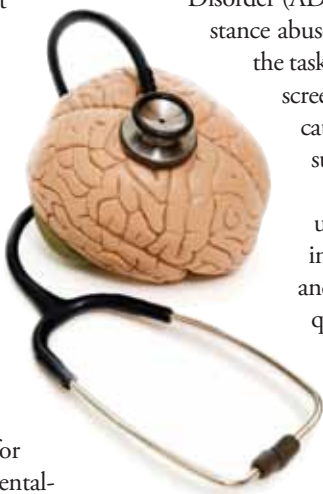


Brain Check Up Anyone?

Annual physicals are part of Americans' regular health care practices, but many are overlooking one of their bodies' most important parts. **BY MARIA T. ARANDA, PH.D.**

AMERICAN'S ANNUAL MEDICAL evaluations seldom include a screening of mental health functioning. A recent study found that only 23 percent of physicians screened their adolescent patients for mental health difficulties. Yet recent research shows that half of all lifelong mental health disorders start by age 14, and mental health symptoms can be observed two to four years prior to the emergence of full-blown problems.

In 2009 the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force and the American Academy of Pediatrics, recommended annual depression screenings for all teens aged 12-18. Annual mental-



health screenings, or check-ups, can determine if your child is showing initial signs of depression, anxiety or suicidality. Screenings can also flag Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as well as eating and substance abuse disorders. Equally important, the task force found that mental health screenings were safe and did not cause patients to feel depressed or suicidal.

A few questionnaires are used for mental health screenings and check-ups. Children and teens are asked if they frequently feel tired, sad, irritable or lonely – common symptoms of depression. To screen for anxiety, they're asked if they worry a lot and are frequently afraid of

new situations. Questions regarding ADHD include whether they're frequently distracted or "daydreamy."

Affirmative answers to these questions are certainly not enough to diagnose a child with a mental health disorder. They simply indicate a need for further evaluation to rule out more serious conditions. If further evaluation reveals the presence of mental health disorders, many treatments are now available to address them – treatments that research has shown work effectively.

Primary care physicians, pediatricians and psychologists can complete mental health check-ups. Like physicals, they're safe and quick. Given the toll that mental health conditions can have on children, their school performance, their friendships and their families, there is much to gain by thinking preventively.

So the next time your child or teen is scheduled for a physical check-up, be sure to include their brain. After all, there's nothing better than peace of mind.



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