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Dr. Andy: No more testicular checks? Not so fast

7:26 PM, Sep. 12, 2011 | Comments

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If you haven't been an adolescent boy lately, then you may not remember the anxiety of that annual physical. You know, the part where the doctor told you, "Ok, drop your shorts and underwear and let's check you down there." Usually this is followed by an awkward silence when the unfortunate boy pretends not to have heard, or not to have understood.

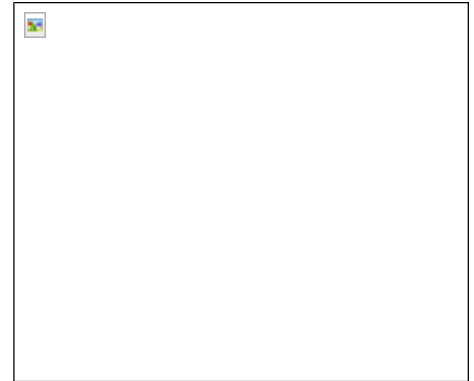
For years, the reasons explained to these young men and their parents were to check for hernias and to screen them for testicular

cancer. Unlike most cancers that are more common as we get older, testicular cancer tends to happen in young men. Often, I explain to these young men what a normal testicle is supposed to feel like so that if they feel anything unusual they can tell their parents and call me.

Lance Armstrong, a personal hero of mine and seven-time winner of the Tour de France bicycle race, is always an example I use for my young teen patients of the need for self-testicular examinations. The story as I tell it is that Lance was diagnosed with testicular cancer after

already having had the cancer spread through much of his body. While I may not be sure of the truth of this story, it certainly helps to demonstrate the need for screening and early diagnosis. Fortunately Lance survived treatment to return to cycling, but not all are so lucky.

The latest recommendations of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force regarding testicular cancer screening may change things a bit. It turns out that testicular screening examinations may not actually save lives from testicular cancer. Yes, that's correct. The conclusion by the group is that there is inadequate evidence that screening of otherwise normal young men, by either self-



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examination or by physician examination, leads to detecting testicular cancer at earlier or more treatable stages.

While not many cancers affect males age 15-34, the most common of those uncommon cancers is testicular cancer. Still, it affects only about 5.4 cases per 100,000 males. Most cases of testicular cancer are discovered accidentally by patients or their partners. More good news is that based on the latest information from the National Cancer Institute, more than 90 percent of testicular cancer cases will be cured regardless of how advanced they are when diagnosed.

OK, so it appears that screening young men for testicular cancer has limited value, so does that mean no more exams for these young men? Sorry guys, no such luck. Testicular examinations are often useful for checking for hernias in the student athlete. Furthermore, while the benefits of screening testicular examinations may be in question, there is unquestionably no harm in testicular examinations. These sometimes embarrassing examinations also often provide a good opportunity to discuss information about sexual development.

Editor's note: The information in this column is meant to discuss medical issues in general. Individual decisions should be made by the reader only after consultation with their physician. Names and situational details have been changed to protect privacy.

-Dr. Andy Oakes-Lottridge is the only concierge physician exclusively making house calls in Southwest Florida; with pediatric and adult hospital privileges.

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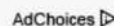
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