An annual gynecological (GYN) exam is a routine checkup designed to ensure that a woman is healthy both inside and out. The exam consists of a brief physical assessment to check thyroid, heart, blood pressure and lungs, a breast exam to check for lumps or soreness, and a pelvic examination to assess the condition of the external and internal reproductive organs and screen for certain health problems.

Both the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Cancer Society recommend a first annual exam (with pap smear) no later than age 21 and/or within three years of the onset of sexual activity. There are many other good reasons to schedule an annual exam, including questions or concerns about menstrual periods, pelvic pain, irregular bleeding or sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Things to consider
If you are making an appointment at Gannett for the first time, you may want to think about questions or concerns that you have related to the annual exam:

• What can I expect from the exam at Gannett?
• Is it a problem if I have my period on the day of my appointment?
• Should I refrain from sexual activity just before the exam?

We provide an opportunity to discuss concerns in a special “health history” appointment with a professional clinical counselor or trained volunteer peer educator before the annual exam.

Health history discussion
During the health history and annual exam you will be asked specific questions related to your sexual development and activity. While these questions may be personal, they are medically necessary to fully assess your comprehensive health needs. The kinds of questions the clinician might ask will involve your menstrual history, whether or not you are sexually active (and what this means for you), and the types of contraceptive and/or safer sex products you use or have used. If you are ever unsure why your clinician asks a particular question, please ask.

Confidentiality and comfort
Remember, your discussions and records are protected by strict confidentiality laws and procedures. We will not disclose information about your health care to anyone without your permission, even if you are under age 18. If you have questions about confidentiality and how it applies to your annual exam, medical bills, or health insurance, please talk with us.

Our goal is to make you as comfortable as possible with the gynecological exam. We will listen to your questions, values, beliefs, and experiences with respect, and will do our best to accommodate any special needs that you have (e.g., seeing a particular provider, bringing a friend or partner with you).

You can find information about other dimensions of sexual health and health care at www.gannett.cornell.edu. If you cannot find what you need or prefer to speak directly with a nurse or clinical counselor, call Gannett during business hours. We want to be sure you have the information and support necessary to address this important aspect of your health.
What happens during the pelvic exam?

**The Internal Exam**

In order to examine the inside of your vagina and see your cervix, your clinician will gently insert a plastic or metal instrument, called a speculum (see photo). It is important to try to relax during this exam; your clinician will guide you through it. As the speculum is inserted and opened, you may feel some discomfort, but it should not be painful. Once the speculum is in place, your clinician can perform one or more of the following tests.

A. *Pap Smear:* A pap smear is taken to screen for cervical cancer. A tiny brush or “broom” is used to collect the cells from the surface of the cervix. This sample is then sent to an outside lab to be evaluated. About 50% of women feel a brief pinching sensation during the pap, but other women feel nothing at all.

B. *Other Testing:* If requested (or if there is an abnormal appearance of the cervix or vagina), your clinician will test for infections (e.g., chlamydia or other sexually transmitted infections). A small swab is used to collect a sample. Some of these infections can be detected at the time of the visit by examining the sample under a microscope, but others require further testing in the laboratory.

**The Bimanual Exam**

After the speculum exam, the speculum will be removed and the clinician will insert two gloved fingers into your vagina and place the other hand on top of your lower abdomen. This allows him or her to feel the size, shape, and position of the uterus, ovaries and surrounding structures. You may feel a slight twinge when the ovaries are palpated – this is normal. If you feel any discomfort at any time during the internal exam, please be sure to let your clinician know.

*Reminder: The health history appointment is a good time to ask questions about the pelvic exam and any tests that will be performed.*