

Tips for Choosing a Primary Care Physician

Your primary care physician is the doctor you visit for general health problems, so it is important to find a doctor who best fits your needs. If you have recently moved, changed your employment or joined a new health insurance plan, you may be required to find a new primary care physician. Having a doctor whose background you have researched and with whom you feel comfortable is your best reassurance for receiving proper medical care. The following information can help you make this important decision.

Common Types of Health Insurance Plans

A search for a doctor should begin with an understanding of your healthcare insurance plan. Traditional (or fee-for-service) medical programs will usually allow you to choose the services of any doctor, whether or not he or she is affiliated with a particular hospital or healthcare provider facility. This freedom of choice generally costs more than a managed care plan.

Managed care programs like HMOs (health maintenance organizations) and PPOs (preferred provider organizations) may offer a more limited selection of physicians and participating hospitals, but usually at lower costs. A managed care program's plan should offer a handbook of participating primary care physicians and specialists or a phone number where you can ask about enrolled physicians.

When you are in an HMO, your choice of a primary care provider (PCP) becomes especially important. Under this plan, you will always see your primary care provider first when you are ill, except in the case of emergencies. Your primary care provider will then treat your illness or, if more specialized care is needed, refer you to a specialist within your HMO's provider network.

If you are enrolled in Medicare Plan B (which covers some physician services), you should be able to select any Medicare-approved health care provider. While a large number of physicians do accept Medicare, make sure to call and ask before choosing a particular doctor for your primary care. If you, or a family member, are covered by your state's Medicaid program, contact the state Medicaid office for a list of doctors who accept Medicaid.

Factors to Consider

Time spent searching for the right primary care provider is a good investment in your long-term health. No two doctors have identical experience, qualifications or treatment philosophies. It is important to thoroughly look into the background of each potential physician. Since you may not have time to research individual doctors once a medical problem occurs, it is crucial to do this in advance while you are healthy. The following indicators are useful for comparing physicians:

- **Credentials:** Look into the physician's education and training. Ask what medical school they attended and where they completed residency training. You should also check that the doctor is board-certified

in his or her specialty. Being board-certified is a good indication that a doctor is highly trained in his or her field. If you want to be really thorough, you can call a particular board to confirm a doctor's certification. For example, if your physician is a family practitioner, you could call the American Board of Family Practice to make sure the doctor is certified. In addition, you can ask the doctor about any additional training or experience, such as research or fellowships, he or she has had. A fellowship is additional training a physician has received in his or her area of specialty.

- **Background:** Your state medical agency may have records of complaints filed or actions taken against doctors in your area. You may also find it helpful to ask friends, family or coworkers about which doctors they have used for medical care and the quality of care they received.
- **Demeanor:** A doctor should always be patient, maintain his or her composure, and be willing to take the time to properly explain things to you. You should feel comfortable enough to ask your doctor any questions and, if you have doubts, challenge the prescribed treatment. If you are looking for a doctor who is open to alternative medicines and treatments, ask.
- **Proximity and availability:** For convenience, the doctor's practice and the affiliated hospital should be a reasonable distance away. Find out if the physician is taking new patients. Also, make sure the doctor's days and hours of availability are convenient for you. Doctors should have a paging service for serious calls during non-office hours and a backup physician you can see when your regular physician is overbooked or unavailable.

In addition to these factors, it is necessary to choose the type of doctor that will best suit your needs. There are four different types of primary care physicians:

- **General practitioners:** treat a wide variety of problems in all different ages
- **Family practitioners:** similar to general practitioners, but are trained in family care
- **Internists:** doctors for adults, who sometimes specialize in specific areas
- **Geriatricians:** care for the elderly and are trained in either family or internal medicine

Before you make a final decision, interview a few different doctors to get a feel for their personalities and medical philosophies. By doing this, you can select a doctor whose approach matches your medical care preferences. Below are some questions you can refer to when you speak with a doctor:

- Are you accepting new patients?
- How long have you been in practice, and what is your background?
- What is your specialty? Are you board-certified in a certain area?
- Do you participate in my insurance plan?
- With what hospital, medical group or facility are you affiliated?
- Where do you practice? What are your office hours?
- Do you have a paging service? What physician is available when you are not?
- What is your practice philosophy or approach to care? If you have an existing medical condition, ask the doctor about their approach to and experience with that particular illness.
- If anything serious ever comes up, do you have a problem with me seeking a second opinion?

Visiting Your Primary Care Physician

When you decide which doctor you want as your primary care physician, make your first appointment. Arrive early on the day you are scheduled for, as you will be asked to fill out new patient forms.

Make sure you bring the following items to your appointment:

- Past medical records
- List of past and current medical problems
- Family medical history information
- List of all medications and dosage, including both prescription and over-the-counter drugs
- List of all drug allergies or serious reactions
- Identification
- Insurance card

Try to be as honest and open with your doctor as possible when you first meet with them. You only hurt yourself when you hide your bad health habits or problems. The more your physician knows about your symptoms and lifestyle, the better chance he or she will have of treating you properly.

If you are in good general health, it is recommended that you visit your primary doctor for a checkup at least once a year. These routine examinations are important: They allow the doctor to monitor your overall health, detect diseases such as cancer and heart disease (which can be treated more successfully when diagnosed early), and prescribe any necessary treatments.

Personalized Assistance

Your needs are unique. Call your 800 number and let ComPsych assist with finding a physician to meet your specific criteria.

Resources

- American Board of Family Medicine: www.theabfm.org
- Medicare.gov: www.medicare.gov
- National Institute on Aging: www.nia.nih.gov
- MedlinePlus: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus
- American Medical Association: www.ama-assn.org
- Healthfinder.gov: <https://healthfinder.gov/>

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