

Choosing Your Child's Doctor

During your baby's first year of life, he or she will be growing at an incredibly rapid rate. Your infant will need to see a physician regularly during the first year-- perhaps for eight or more visits-- for required immunizations and health monitoring. There may be more visits if your baby has an illness or if you would like the reassurance that your child is healthy.

How you go about selecting a family physician or pediatrician with the expertise to care for your growing child is a very personal decision. You may really like the doctor who evaluated your newborn during your brief hospital stay. Your own obstetrician also may be an excellent choice.

Family physician or pediatrician?

Pediatricians are specialists who have been trained specifically in medicine for and treatment of children. Pediatricians only treat children and have achieved three years of specialty training in addition to four years of medical school. They may be board certified and required to re-certify every seven years.

Typically, family physicians also have completed three years of specialty training in addition to four years of medical school. However, their residency program usually covers wider areas of medicine, including internal medicine, obstetrics, gynecology and psychiatry. The advantage of a family physician is that he or she can treat every member of your family.

What to Look for in a Doctor

When you are deciding on the right doctor for your child, think for the long haul. Ideally, you want to be satisfied enough with the physician and his or her level of care that you will be bringing your child to see him or her through your child's teenage years, if necessary.

The hallmarks of a desirable child physician include:

- **Thoroughness and expertise:** The doctor should be able to answer all of your questions and not leave you confused or doubtful. He or she should be good at explaining all procedures and treatments. You should feel comfortable enough to ask the doctor any question and, if necessary, to challenge his or her prescribed treatment if you feel unsure.
- **A friendly and personable demeanor:** The doctor should always maintain his or her composure and patience, especially when your child is noncompliant, and be friendly and comforting to kids.
- **Round-the-clock availability:** The doctor should have a paging service for serious calls during non-office hours and a backup physician, perhaps within his or her practice, if your doctor is not available.

- **A strong support staff:** Office auxiliaries and any partnering and backup physicians should be friendly and helpful.

Where Your Child's Doctor May Practice

Doctors can practice in a variety of settings. You may feel more comfortable with one type of setting over another.

- **Solo practices:** In this setting, the practitioner usually can build closer, one-on-one doctor/patient relationships and provide more individualized attention. However, because the practice may be small, the doctor may not accept new patients and may have a very limited schedule.
- **Partnerships:** These practices usually have two doctors on call with a small office staff. One physician usually can fill in for the other easily.
- **Small group practices:** These consist of more than two physicians who generally share a small office and staff.
- **Large group practices:** This type of practice can consist strictly of one type of specialist or include other types of doctors for a multi-specialty practice. It may include five or more physicians with a larger office staff and sometimes a specially trained nurse to answer phone calls. Many times the choice of which doctor you see will depend on staff scheduling.
- **Hospitals:** These larger facilities will have several specialists on staff at all times.
- **Public health clinics:** Whether small or large, these settings offer limited care. At the very least, you can get required immunizations and checkups.

Where to Get Referrals

- **Friends and family:** A great way to find a good doctor is to talk to local friends, relatives and co-workers. Ask them which doctors have inspired their loyalty and confidence. Who do they trust to care for their children? People you know cannot only give you names but also relay personal experiences and tell you why they are satisfied with a particular pediatrician.
- **Your medical plan:** Your medical-insurance carrier may restrict your choice of pediatricians, but generally it can offer you a provider handbook and a list of physicians to call.
- **A local day-care center or nursery school:** If you are new to town and do not know enough helpful people yet, this is a source of good information. Parents often talk to the day-care staff about doctors they like or do not like. Experienced nursery staffers should be able to give you a few names.
- **Your OB/GYN:** It is a good idea to ask the physician handling your pregnancy for a recommendation. Doctors are typically aware of other physicians' reputations, professional skills and capabilities. Often, the doctor who delivered your baby can become your child's physician.
- **Hospital telephone referral:** Your nearest hospital or medical center likely will have a physician referral service or doctors' hotline. More and more institutions now offer this free service and provide the reassurance that listed physicians generally will have some hospital privileges and credentialing.
- **Medical organizations or specialty groups:** When other avenues fail, use your local phone book (look under family practice, physicians or pediatricians). Contact your county or state medical association,

which lists all physicians of every specialty who are members in your area, or the American Academy of Pediatrics, which has members all over the country.

The Interview

Once you have two or three names that fit your criteria (the location, the office hours, whether or not they accept your medical plan, etc.), it is wise to make an appointment and conduct a personal interview with the doctor. Some physicians will charge a slight fee for their time, but many will not. If you can, arrive a little early and see how crowded the doctor's waiting room is. Get a feel for how long it takes a patient to be seen. Do you want fast, efficient service, or do you want to know that this doctor takes as much time as necessary to see each patient? Is there a play area with toys? Is there a separate waiting area for contagious children?

Suggested interview questions include:

1. Where do you have hospital privileges (perhaps at more than one institution)?
2. What are your credentials? Where did you go to medical school and do your residency? Are you board-certified and, if so, since when?
3. Are there extended hours for evenings and weekends?
4. When you call with an emergency, what is the procedure?
5. When it is not an emergency, what is the average time before your call is returned? Do pediatric nurses field any calls?
6. Who covers for the doctor when he or she is not on-call?
7. Will he or she recommend second opinions and if so, when?
8. Where is lab work conducted (in-house lab work may be less expensive)?
9. What are the standard payment arrangements, and what payment options are available?

After you interview one to three physicians, you may wish to check a bit further by calling your state board of medical examiners. If a physician has had any serious troubles (e.g., malpractice lawsuits or a previous loss of license), you can get this information from the medical examiners.

Your final decision should be based on the factors that are important to you and on who can offer the best care for your child. Remember that the doctor should not only be a trusted, well-skilled physician, but also a friend to your child, someone who could potentially provide care and comfort through childhood and into adolescence.

Resources

- American Academy of Pediatrics - Health Reform and the AAP: <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/federal-advocacy/Documents/ACAImplementationFactSheets.pdf>
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD): www.nichd.nih.gov

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