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How to Choose the Right Doctor

Be a Wise Healthcare Consumer

Choosing a primary care doctor — or any doctor, for that matter — is probably the most important healthcare decision you will make. Primary care doctors have the expertise to provide your medical care over a long period of time. They help you stay healthy, manage your care, and will recommend specialists for particular conditions when warranted.

Internists and family practitioners are the largest group of primary care physicians for adults. Many women see OB/GYNs for some or all of their general medical care needs. Pediatricians and family practitioners are the primary caregivers for many children.

The guidelines below will help you search for and choose a physician that will best suit you and your family's needs.

Making Your List of Potential Candidates

The first step in finding a doctor is preparing a list of potential candidates. You're probably thinking that there are thousands of doctors in your area, and how can you narrow it down to just a few candidates?

First, you need to know what type of health plan you have and if there are any restrictions on the physicians you choose from. Chances are, you have a provider

directory from your health plan that lists the doctors available to you through that plan. Remember, if you have an HMO plan, you most likely are not covered if you see a physician outside of the network. If you have a PPO plan, you probably can choose a doctor that is not in the network, but you have to be willing to pay extra out of your pocket if you do so.

With your provider directory in hand, it's time to think about what you want and need in your doctor. Consider the following:

- Is the doctor highly rated by a consumer or other group?
- Does the doctor have experience with my condition?
- Does the doctor have privileges at the hospital of my choice?
- Is the physician part of my health plan?
- Is the office close to my home or work?

Keeping these and any other requirements in mind, begin making your list of physicians who fit your needs. The following are ways to begin your search:

- Review your health plan's provider directory.
- Ask doctors or other health professionals for a referral.

- Check the Physician Select service of the American Medical Association's Web site at <http://www.ama-assn.org/aps/amahg.htm>. This feature allows you to search for doctors in your area by name or by specialty, and provides each physician's specialty, location, training, and board certification.
- Call a physician referral service.
- Contact local medical societies.
- Seek recommendations from family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers.

Narrow Your List: Check Quality

After you've made a list of some promising candidates, narrow your list further. One way to do this is to do some quality checks on the doctors on your list. Try some of the avenues below to find out about the quality of the physicians on your list.

- Find out if a consumer group or other group has rated the doctors. Be sure to find out how reliable the ratings are.
- Go to <http://www.docboard.org>. DocFinder is run by Administrators in Medicine, and contains the licensing

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background and disciplinary information of physicians and other health care practitioners in several states.

- Contact the American Board of Medical Specialties at 1-800-733-2267. This organization can tell you if a doctor is board certified. This means that the doctor has completed a training program in a specialty and has passed an exam that assesses their knowledge, skills, and experience.
- Call the American Medical Association at (312) 464-5000 for information on specific physicians' training, specialties, and board certification.
- Check your state medical examiner's office to determine if there is a restriction on a doctor's license.

And remember, a personal referral from a trusted family member, friend, or another physician or health practitioner can often put you at ease about your choice.

Contact the Doctors' Offices

The next and most important step is to contact the offices of the physicians on your narrowed list. Now, you can begin to form your own impression of their practice philosophies, office staff, and so on. After you've verified that the doctor is in your health plan's network, and that he is accepting new patients, ask some preliminary questions.

- At which hospitals does the doctor have privileges?
- What are her office hours? Are after-hours or weekend appointments available?
- If necessary, does the doctor or someone in the office speak Spanish (or any

language other than English)?

- Who covers for him when he is not available?
- How long does it take to get a routine appointment? Is it difficult to make a same-day appointment for an illness or injury?
- How long is the average wait in the office before an appointment?
- What is the appointment cancellation policy?
- Does the office send reminders for preventive care screenings, such as Pap smears or colonoscopy?
- What procedure should I follow if I have an urgent care need or an emergency?
- Is the doctor, a nurse practitioner, or physician's assistant available for medical advice over the phone if my condition doesn't warrant an appointment?
- How many patients does the doctor see per hour?
- Will the doctor allow me to interview her over the phone or in-person before I make my decision? Will I be charged for this visit?

Interview Your Final Choices

Narrow your list to a few top choices, and set up interviews with each physician. The goal of this interview is to meet him in-person, discuss his philosophy, and ultimately, determine what impression the doctor makes on you. Be sure to be well-prepared for the meeting, have your questions written down, and keep the meeting as brief as possible while still getting all the information you feel is necessary to make your decision.

Here are some things to evaluate during your interview.

- Was the doctor receptive to your interview/screening?
- Does she communicate clearly and in language you can understand?
- Does he have a proactive approach to wellness and prevention?
- Are the office personnel friendly and appropriate?
- Are the facilities clean and pleasant?
- Did the doctor ask me questions and make me feel comfortable?

The most important thing to remember during this meeting is to trust your reaction to or impression of the physician. If you feel uncomfortable, it's probably not a good fit. Even if the physician came highly recommended from someone you trust, everyone has different needs and preferences. You may be surprised to find that you react negatively to a doctor that your best friend speaks very highly of!

Researching and meeting several doctors before making your choice may be time-consuming, but is well worth your effort. Choosing the person you entrust with your healthcare is one of the most important decisions you can make. Together, you and your doctor can manage your overall health and well-being, and address any conditions you have with quality, cost-effective treatments.

This brochure is for informational purposes only and is not intended to replace the advice of insurance professional.