

Finding a New Doctor

There are many reasons why you might be looking for a new doctor. You may have moved to another city, or your doctor could be retiring. Whatever the reason, the following points to consider can help you find a doctor who is right for you.

For your primary care doctor, you may want a general or family practitioner, an internist or a geriatrician:

- General practitioners provide healthcare for wide range of medical problems. They don't specialize in any specific area.
- Family practitioners are similar to general practitioners, but with extra training in healthcare for all family members, regardless of age.
- Internists are doctors specifically for adults. Some internists take additional training to become specialists. For example, cardiologists are internists who specialize in heart disease.
- Geriatricians specialize in the care of older adults. A geriatrician is trained in family practice or internal medicine, but has additional training in caring for seniors.

Ask around

Once you have a sense of what kind of doctor you need, ask people you know about doctors they use and like. Friends, coworkers and other health professionals may be helpful. A doctor whose name comes up often might be a good one to try. It may help to have several names to

choose from in case the one you pick isn't taking new patients or is out-of-network.

What should you look for in a doctor? Obviously, you want to find a doctor who is well-trained and skilled. But there's more to a good doctor than a pedigree. A doctor who takes the time to get to know you may be able to help you prevent potential health problems and better manage problems when they occur.

When you have several candidate doctors to choose from, call their offices. The office staff can give you information about the doctor's education and training. Ask to speak to the office manager or a nurse and tell them you have a few questions about office policies, standard insurance the office takes, whether or not they file the insurance claims for you, payment methods, and the hospitals where the doctor sends patients. Key points should include:

- **Board certification** – Board-certified doctors have extra training after medical school to become specialists in a field of medicine such as family practice, internal medicine or geriatrics.
- **Type of health insurance** – Do they accept Medicare?
- **Group practice** – If this is a group practice, who are the other doctors and what are their specialties?
- **Coverage** – Who sees patients if the doctor isn't available?

- **Office location** – Is it nearby? Is it accessible? How close to the office can you park?
- **Lab work** – Will I need to go somewhere else for tests or are lab tests done in the office?



Because communication is important to good healthcare, you want a doctor who will listen carefully to your concerns, answer your questions, and explain things clearly and fully.

Ready, get set ...

Now that you've picked a doctor, it's time to make your first appointment. Before you go, write down any questions you may have. It's also a good idea to take a list of your medicines. Include both prescription and over-the-counter drugs, even vitamins, supplements and eye drops. Make a list of any drug allergies or serious drug reactions you've had.

Since this is your first visit, the doctor will probably take a medical history and ask quite a few questions about your health and the medical history of people in your family. It will save time for both of you if you can bring this information with you, instead of scratching your head and wondering if it was your Aunt Tilly or Uncle Charlie who had the gout a few years back. Before you go, it's also a good idea to bring any past medical records you may have or ask your former doctor to send them (be sure to specify how much you wish to be sent or they may only send what they consider relevant to your immediate needs).

Getting to know each other

Because communication is important to good healthcare, you want a doctor who will listen carefully to your concerns, answer your questions, and explain things clearly and fully. During this visit, take time to ask any questions you may still have about the doctor and the practice. For instance, ask the doctor:

- Will you give me written instructions about my care?
- May I bring a family member (spouse, daughter or son) to my office visits?
- Are you willing to talk with my family about my condition?
- Will you maintain my privacy if I ask you not to discuss my condition with anyone else?

After the meeting, ask yourself if you felt comfortable and confident with this doctor. Were you at ease asking questions? Did the doctor clearly answer your questions? If you are not sure, schedule a visit with one of the other doctors on your list.

A good doctor/patient relationship is like a partnership. Both you and your doctor need to work together to solve your medical problems and maintain your good health. Finding a doctor who suits your needs is the first and most important step. Good communication with the doctor and the office staff is key to a continuing relationship. 

Related resources

American Academy of Family Physicians
familydoctor.org

**American College of Physicians –
American Society of Internal Medicine**
acponline.org

American Geriatrics Society
americangeriatrics.org

American Medical Association
ama-assn.org

American Osteopathic Association
osteopathic.org