



### Choosing a Doctor

**Fact:**

Your health care plan may narrow your choice of doctors.

**Fiction:**

It's a myth that all doctors have the same credentials.

Choosing a health care provider is an important decision that calls for an informed, thoughtful selection.

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### First Steps to Narrow Your Search

First, find out which doctors are available to you. Most health insurance plans today either narrow your choice of doctors to those who participate in the plan, or charge you more if you see a doctor who is "out-of-network." Find out how this works, and ask your health care company for a directory of providers (or visit their web site).

Then, decide what type of doctor(s) you need. Whether or not your plan requires you to do so, it is a good idea to select a primary care physician (PCP) first. Often a PCP is an internal medicine physician (also called an internist), a general practitioner or a family physician. A PCP usually serves as your main doctor, providing much of your care and referring you to specialists, if necessary. Women sometimes rely on their obstetrician/gynecologist for some or all of their primary care needs. Children's PCPs are usually your family physician or a pediatrician.

Depending on your plan, physician assistants, nurse practitioners and certified nurse midwives may also be available as primary care providers. Physician assistants must practice in partnership with doctors. Nurse practitioners and certified nurse midwives sometimes work with physicians and sometimes work independently.

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### Getting Some Names

Sources for physician names include:

- Your local or state medical societies
- Hospital physician referral services
- Your health plan
- Friends, family, colleagues, clergy or other doctors you know

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### Checking Credentials

For each name:

- Make sure the physician participates in your plan (call each physician's office as plan records may not be totally up to date), or if not, verify how your plan works for out-of-network care
- Make sure the physician is accepting new patients
- Ask your health plan or the doctor's office for information on the doctor's education, training and experience
- Learn if the doctor is board certified. Although doctors can practice medicine without being certified, this ensures that the doctor has completed several years of training in a specialty and passed an exam.
- Call the American Medical Association (AMA) credentialing line at 800-665-

- 2882 for information on training, specialties and board certification
- Contact your state department of insurance or state medical licensing board to see if any complaints or disciplinary actions have been filed against the doctor
- See if a consumer group has rated doctors in your area

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## Narrowing the Field

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Contact each doctor's office to find out:

- When the office hours are, how long it takes to get an appointment, and the average office wait
- Whether the office sends reminders or calls about appointments or needed tests
- Who "covers" for this doctor when he or she is not available
- Whether the doctor or someone in the office speaks your primary language
- Whether the doctor (or nurse or physician assistant) will give advice over the phone for common medical problems (your health plan may also have this feature)
- If you have a preferred hospital, whether the doctor has privileges there

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## Getting to Know You

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Some practices allow you to meet the doctor before you make a choice. If so, find out if there is a charge. If not, you may wish to make an early appointment with the doctor you choose. By talking to the doctor, you may learn if he or she:

- Seems interested and respectful
- Asks questions and listens
- Lets you ask questions
- Explains things in a way you can understand
- Helps you feel at ease and comfortable
- Seems knowledgeable about your health problems
- Asks your opinions or preferences about types of treatment
- Spends enough time with you

Do your research, but also trust your instincts when you select a doctor. Also, give yourself time to get to know one another; it may take time to develop a good doctor/patient relationship.

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