



The ABCs on PCPs

Choosing a primary care physician (PCP)

How did you pick your doctor? Did you get advice from friends? Did you choose someone near your home or work? Whether you go to your doctor rarely or often, you should find one you like and trust..

Why do I need a PCP?

You may go to one or more specialists. Still, you should have a PCP for regular things like checkups. There are five main types of PCPs:¹

- **Family practitioners** work with people of all ages. They offer a wide range of care, from checkups to pregnancy care. This type of doctor might be a good choice if you want to keep all of your family “under one roof.” A doctor who treats everyone in a family can get a better view of each person’s health.
- **Pediatricians** specialize in children’s health care. They treat kids from birth to age 18.
- **Internists** mostly work with adults. They offer a range of care, including preventive care. But they may have special knowledge about certain health problems. So if you have a long-term health problem, an internist who focuses on your problem may be a good fit for you.
- **OB/GYN doctors** specialize in the care of women. OB/GYN stands for obstetrician/gynecologist. If you’re a teenage girl or a woman of childbearing age, this type of doctor might be a good choice for you.
- **Nurse practitioners and physician assistants** aren’t doctors. But they’ve received a lot of training and can do many of the same things. For instance, they may give shots, do checkups and treat some health problems. They may be the main person you work with or they may work with a doctor.

Need a doctor?

If you need to find a doctor, go to [healthlink.com](https://www.healthlink.com)



What should I think about when making my choice?

First, get a list of the PCPs in your health plan's network who are close to your home or office. You can find this at healthlink.com. Also, make sure the PCP:²

- Offers high-quality care.
- Can work at a hospital that is in your health plan's network.
- Has the training and background to treat your health problems

Some people want their first meeting with a new doctor to be more like an interview than an office visit. Some PCPs do not charge a fee for this. Some charge a small amount. Other people get answers to their questions by calling the doctor's office. No matter how you go about it, make sure to get answers to these questions:³

1. Is the doctor accepting new patients?
2. What are the office hours?
3. If I wanted a routine visit right now, how soon could I be seen?
4. How much time is set aside for a routine visit?
5. If I cancel an office visit, will I be charged for it?
6. Can I talk with the doctor about a health problem on the phone or by email?
7. Does the doctor work with nurse practitioners or physician assistants?
8. Who fills in for the doctor when he or she is not there?
9. Will your office file insurance claims for me?

Picking up good vibrations

Two equally skilled doctors may give you two very different experiences. The right fit depends on your personality and your PCP's. A good PCP will:^{1,2,3}

- Talk to you about preventive care — things like quitting smoking and eating well.
- Want you to ask questions.
- Help you make choices about your care.
- Listen to you and treat you with respect.
- Explain things clearly.
- Spend plenty of time with you so you won't feel rushed.

Resources

For more tips, visit the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality online at ahrq.gov. Click on **For Patients & Consumers** then type **Choosing Quality Care** in the search box on the right. You'll find articles, checklists and more. Plus you can find links to tools that will help you check PCP certifications and quality ratings.



Sources

1 National Institute on Aging, "Choosing a doctor," nia.nih.gov updated November 2009, accessed December 2011.

2 Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, "Tips To Help You Find a Good Doctor," ahrq.gov, updated July 2008, accessed December 2011.

3 WebMD, "Find a Doctor Who Will Be a Partner," webmd.com, updated April 2011, accessed December 2011.

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