

Choosing a Doctor

Mrs. Wiley had a big surprise the other day when she called her doctor's office to make an appointment. The receptionist told her that Dr. Horowitz was retiring at the end of the year. After all this time - after the doctor had treated her for strep throat, bladder infections, and that nasty broken wrist; after helping her through menopause - she felt like she was losing a trusted friend. Mrs. Wiley worried that she wouldn't be able to find a new doctor she would like.

There are many reasons why you might be looking for a new doctor. Maybe you've moved to another city, or your doctor could be retiring. If you need a new doctor, the following ideas can help you find one who is right for you.

Types of Primary Care Doctors?

Your primary care doctor is the doctor you usually see for general health problems. When choosing a new doctor, you need to decide if you want this doctor to be a general or family practitioner, an internist, or a geriatrician.

- General practitioners treat a wide range of medical problems in people of all ages.
- Family practitioners are similar to general practitioners, but have extra training to care for all family members, young or old.
- Internists are doctors for adults. Some internists take additional training to become specialists. For example, a cardiologist is an internist who specializes in heart disease.
- Geriatricians care for older adults. A geriatrician is trained in family practice or internal medicine, and has additional training in caring for older people.

Asking for Help With Your Search

Once you have a sense of what kind of doctor is best for you, ask people you trust, for example, friends, family, and coworkers, about doctors they use and like. You

might ask questions such as: "Do you know a good doctor?", "Would you recommend your doctor?", "What do you like about your doctor?", "How long does it take to get an appointment? If you need to, can you usually see your doctor right--on the same day if you get sick?".

In addition to talking to friends, family, and coworkers, you can talk with other health professionals you see, for example, your heart doctor or the doctor you see for your lung problems, and ask for recommendations. If your doctor is retiring or leaving the practice, you might ask if he or she has picked a replacement. You can check with your insurance plan for a list of doctors in your area. Another idea is to contact a local hospital, medical center, medical society, physician referral service, or nearby medical school. Online resources, like the website www.healthfinder.gov, may be useful too.

After talking with people, checking with local resources, and looking online, you may find a few names keep coming up. These might be the doctors you want to consider. Make a list of several names of doctors in case your first choice is not taking new patients or does not participate in your health insurance plan.

If you belong to a managed care plan, you can get a list of doctors from the plan's membership services office. Your choices will be limited to the doctors who are part of the plan.

What does Medicare cover?

If you belong to a managed care plan, like a Medicare Advantage Plan, your choice of doctors may be limited to those who participate in your plan. If you choose a doctor outside your health insurance plan, you will have to pay a bigger share of your medical costs. Your plan's membership services office can give you a list of available doctors. For information about Medicare benefits, you can call the toll-free Medicare hotline at 1-800-633-4227 (1-800-MEDICARE). Information about Medicare plans, who is eligible, how to enroll, and more is available online at www.medicare.gov.

Calling the Doctors on Your List

After you pick two or three doctors, call their offices. The office staff can give you information about the doctor's education and training. They can also tell you about office policies, what insurance they take, if they file the insurance claims for you, what types of payment they accept, and the hospitals where the doctor sends patients.

You might say, "Before I make an appointment, I have some questions about the office and the practice." Some questions you might want to ask are:

- **What type of health insurance does the office take?** You want to find out if the doctor accepts Medicare or any other health insurance you have.
- **Where is the doctor's office located? Is there parking?** You want to make sure that it will be easy for you to get there.
- **How long is the usual office visit?** You want a doctor who will take time to listen carefully to your concerns, answer your questions, and explain things clearly and fully in a way that you can understand. Good doctor-patient communication is important for developing treatment plans that address your specific health needs.
- **Is the doctor part of a group practice?** If the doctor is part of a group, you may want to find out who the other doctors are and their specialties.
- **Who sees patients if the doctor is out of town or not available?** If the doctor is not part of a group practice, you want to make sure that the doctor has a plan when he or she is not there.
- **Can I get lab work or x-rays done in the office or nearby?** You want to find out if you will need to go to another location for tests or if most lab tests are done in the doctor's office.
- **Is the doctor board certified?** Board-certified doctors have extra training and pass special exams after medical school to become specialists in a field of medicine such as family practice, internal medicine, or geriatrics.

Other Helpful Questions

It might be helpful to learn about the doctor's experience treating older patients or people with a medical history similar to yours. Here are more questions you might want to ask the office staff:

- Does the doctor see many older patients?

- Does the doctor treat many patients with the same chronic health problem that I have (for example, diabetes or heart problems)?
- If I have to go to the hospital, will the doctor take care of me, or will a hospital doctor care for me?

The First Appointment

After choosing a doctor, make your first appointment. This visit is a time for you to get to know the doctor and for the doctor to get to know you.

You will probably be asked to fill out a new-patient form. To help you, bring a list of your past medical problems and all the medicines you take. Include both prescription and over-the-counter drugs, even vitamins, supplements, and eye drops. Write down the dosage you take, such as 20 mg once a day. You might even put all your drugs in a bag and bring them with you to the appointment. Also, write down any drug allergies or serious drug reactions you've had. You will need to give all your drug information to the doctor to include in your medical record.

During the visit, take time to ask the doctor any questions you have about your health. You might want to write these questions down before your visit so you don't forget them. Some questions you may want to ask include:

- 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 if I give my permission?

During your first appointment, the doctor or nurse is likely to ask you questions about your current health and the medical history of your family. This information will also be added to your medical record.

After your first visit, think about if you felt comfortable and confident with this doctor. For example, were you at ease asking questions? Did the doctor clearly answer your questions? Were you treated with respect? Did you feel that your questions were considered thoughtfully? Did you feel the doctor hurried or did not address all your concerns? If you are still not sure the doctor is right for you, schedule a visit with one of the other doctors on your list.

Once you find a doctor you like, your job is not finished. Make sure to have your medical records sent to your new doctor. Your former doctor may charge you for mailing your records.

Remember that a good doctor-patient relationship is a partnership. Regular office visits and open communication with the doctor and office staff are important to maintaining this partnership, treating your medical problems effectively, and keeping you in good health.

For More Information

American Academy of Family Physicians

www.familydoctor.org

American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine

190 North Independence Mall West
Philadelphia, PA 19106-1572
800-523-1546

www.acponline.org

American Geriatrics Society

40 Fulton Street, 18th Floor
New York, NY 10038
800-247-4779

www.americangeriatrics.org

American Medical Association

515 North State Street
Chicago, IL 606154
800-621-8335

www.ama-assn.org

American Osteopathic Association

142 East Ontario Street
Chicago, IL 60611
800-621-1773

www.osteopathic.org

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

7500 Security Boulevard

Baltimore, MD 21244-1850

800-MEDICARE (800-633-4227)

www.medicare.gov

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

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Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

800-222-2225

800-222-4225 (TTY)

www.nia.nih.gov

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