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Finding the Right Doctor

By Barbara Sadick

It goes without saying, but all doctors are not alike. And even if a doctor is capable and experienced, it doesn't mean he or she will connect with you in a way that is most beneficial to you. Consider these steps when looking for a new doctor.

Important Questions

- If you're looking for a primary care physician, do you want a generalist (treats a wide range of problems), an internist (treats adults), or a geriatrician (treats older people)?
- Are age, sex, religion, or language factors in your decision?
- Do you prefer to work with an individual practitioner or a group practice?
- Is proximity an issue?
- Do you have health issues that require special attention?
- Are you looking for a doctor who is affiliated with a particular hospital?
- Do you want your doctor's focus to be on prevention?

Insurance Issues

Once you've decided what's important to you, you'll need to take a look at your health insurance plan. Whether your insurance is an HMO, a PPO, or an individual plan, you must know what it provides for. Many plans require you to choose from a specific list of physicians. Some will allow you to go outside of the list to choose a doctor, but usually that requires payment of additional fees, submission of your own paperwork, and only partial reimbursement. Some doctors don't take any insurance, which means you either have to submit your own paperwork for limited reimbursement from your insurance plan or pay the entire bill yourself. Within these parameters, look for a doctor with whom you can establish a long-term relationship. The doctor you choose should be affiliated with or have privileges at a hospital.

Primary Care Physicians vs. Specialists

Your primary care physician will often serve as a gatekeeper to specialists. Because you may see a specialist only for a specific procedure or condition, experience and ability may be more important than personal rapport. With a specialist, you'll want to know how many similar procedures he or she has performed and what the results have been. Your primary physician and your specialists should be affiliated with the same hospital so that care, information, and records can be easily shared.

Researching Potential Doctors

Begin your search by talking to friends and family. When you've narrowed down the list of doctors, make sure each has graduated from an accredited medical school. Check their ratings, certification, and state licensing status. Find out how long a doctor has been practicing, what his or her special areas of interest are, and whether he or she is board certified.

Ninety percent of U.S. doctors are board certified, an indication that minimum competency requirements have been met. Primary care doctors are board certified in the areas of family or internal medicine. The [Administrators in Medicine's online DocFinder](#) will tell you if a doctor has undergone any disciplinary action or if any malpractice suits or criminal charges have been filed against him or her.

You may prefer to work with a doctor who teaches medical students and residents. Teaching doctors tend to be highly regarded by their peers and are up to date on new medical findings and procedures, although this doesn't necessarily mean that they are better practitioners. If your doctor is affiliated with a teaching hospital, medical students

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could, on some basic level, be involved in your care.

Consider the general quality of care at the hospital with which your doctor is affiliated and what kind of reputation he or she has with hospital staff. When you've found the doctor you think you want to work with, consider making an exploratory appointment to get a feel for the staff, the physical facilities, and the office atmosphere. A doctor's staff often reflects his or her personality.

You may also prefer to work with a doctor whose records are electronic and can be accessed by you at any time. Check to see where x-rays and blood work are done because some doctors send patients to other locations for these procedures.

Communication

If you and your doctor are able to communicate and explore options together, you've found the right doctor. As a patient, you should educate yourself so that the decisions you and your doctor make are informed, well thought out, and sensible. Regard your relationship with your doctor as a long-term investment. The two of you should be a team, working together to make sure you remain as healthy as possible.

Communication is vital to success and to the effective management of your health. Be serious about this decision. It could be one of the most important relationships of your life. And remember—an educated patient is an empowered patient.

Next: [Understanding Healthcare Reform](#)»

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