

QuickTips

For Improving Your Health Care Experience

FINDING A GOOD DOCTOR

Finding a doctor might seem easy. Popular magazines, Web sites, and other media regularly publish lists of “top doctors.” You may also receive newsletters and mailings from doctors in your area or get helpful recommendations from friends and colleagues. However, finding a physician who provides high-quality care and who meets your needs isn’t—and shouldn’t be—a snap decision. Finding a doctor who can communicate and is willing to partner with you in decisions about your health can be hard work, but it is worth the effort.

1 The first question you should consider is whether you need a **primary care** or a **specialty doctor**.

- ➔ A **primary care physician** is a doctor who diagnoses and treats a wide range of common illnesses and conditions. Primary care doctors also provide patient education, offer advice on preventing disease, and coordinate care if a specialist is needed. Primary care doctors may be certified, which means that they have special skills in different areas, such as family or internal medicine. Because primary care doctors tend to have heavy workloads, getting an appointment with one can be difficult.
- ➔ A **specialty doctor, or specialist**, has advanced training in a certain area of medicine focusing on a particular disease, condition, or procedure. Common types of specialists are allergists, cardiologists, and surgeons. General specialists also can refer patients with complex diseases to doctors with even more expertise.

2 Before you make an appointment with either a primary care or specialist doctor, make sure they’re approved.

- ➔ Find out whether your health plan includes that doctor in its approved list of providers. Not all plans include the same doctors in their network. If they don’t, you could end up paying the full cost of the visit.





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3 To be safe, find out whether your doctor is in good standing with State agencies that grant medical licenses to physicians.

- ➔ You can do this through a Web site called DocFinder. This site reports whether disciplinary action or criminal charges have been filed against doctors. Information reported to DocFinder comes from individual State medical and osteopathic boards.
- ➔ State boards are another good source of information on physicians in your area.

4 Do some homework. Even if the doctor you choose is right for your condition, is covered by your health plan, and is in good standing with State agencies, that doesn't mean he or she is your best choice. Find out if the physician:

- ➔ Clearly answers questions about your condition and treatment plan. If there isn't enough time to answer your questions during the appointment, find out if the office will contact you later. Or ask whether there is a good time to call with any follow-up questions. To get the most from your medical appointment, use the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's (AHRQ's) Question Builder tool on our Web site.
- ➔ Uses a hospital whose location and quality you feel comfortable with, in the event you need hospital care. Learn more about the quality of care at many hospitals from the Federal Government's Hospital Compare Web site.
- ➔ Performs routine X-rays and lab services in the office. If not, you may need to travel to a different location for services.
- ➔ Handles insurance claims at the office. If not, you may have to pay for services upfront and file the claims on your own.

Finding the right doctor might not be as easy as it seems at first glance, but the effort you put into it can pay rewards for a lifetime.

Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, www.ahrq.gov

The information contained in this medical self-care newsletter can be used to increase your personal awareness of how to manage minor health issues. If you have any questions or concerns about medical issues impacting you or your family, always contact your health care provider.