

CHOOSING A PRIMARY HEALTH CARE PROVIDER

Who are primary health care providers?

Primary health care providers can be physicians, nurse practitioners, or physician's assistants. Nurse practitioners either work alone or work with physicians, depending on state regulations, and perform general physical exams and check-ups. Physician's assistants always work with a physician and are trained to provide primary care. Call the provider's office to learn more about the differences between these types of providers.

What should I look for in a primary health care provider?

Decide if you want your health care provider to be a woman or a man. You should feel comfortable with your health care provider, since it is important to share personal information and any health problems with her/him. You need to find a health care provider who will listen to your concerns and answer your questions. You should try to find a health care provider who is not too far from your home.

How do I find a health care provider?

You should first make a list of names of health care providers. You can do this by asking your current health care provider, parents, friends, and relatives for the names of health care providers that they go to and like. Make sure that the person has gone to that health care provider more than once. There are other ways to find a provider. You can check the "Physician Select" service of the Web Site of the American Medical Association, at www.ama-assn.org. You can call a doctor referral service at a hospital or a local medical society.

How do I find out about providers' qualifications?

Find out whether the providers on your list are board certified, meaning that they have finished a training program in one area of medicine and have passed a qualifying exam (board). You may call the American Board of Medical Specialties at (800) 776-2378 or check the Web site www.certifieddoctor.org to learn about provider qualifications.

What if I belong to a health plan?

If you belong to a health plan, your choice of health care providers may be limited to providers that are part of the plan. Sometimes you can choose to see any provider. You should check the plan's list of health care providers and speak to a customer service representative of the health plan before you choose a provider.

What if I don't belong to a health plan?

If you don't belong to a health plan, your choice of providers will depend upon your ability to pay for the visit. Check on how much typical office visits and lab tests will cost. Some hospitals, community health centers, and family planning clinics offer sliding fee scales and free care depending on your income.

How do I decide on one primary health care provider?

Once you have made a list of qualified providers, you might want to try calling their offices and asking a few questions. The way that the staff answers your questions can say a lot about the provider. You first need to find out if the provider is covered by your health plan and if she/he is taking new patients. If you don't know if the provider is board certified or what their training is, ask! Some other questions you might ask include:

- Which hospitals does the provider work in?
- What are the office hours (when is the provider available and when can I speak to office staff)?
- Does the provider or someone else in the office speak the language that I am most comfortable speaking?
- How many other providers can see me when my primary care provider is not there? Who are they?
- How long does it usually take to get an appointment with my provider?
- What are the provider's fees? Do I need to pay when I am at the provider's office or will a bill be sent to me?
- What do I do if I need to cancel an appointment?
- What do I do if I have an emergency or if I need medical help after-hours?
- Does the provider give advice over the phone for common medical problems? Can I contact my provider by e-mail?

Do I need to bring anything to my first check-up?

You should take a copy of your health records, including immunizations you have had, to your first check-up. You can get these records from your previous provider or maybe from your school. Also, bring any medicines you are taking, or bring a list of those medicines. At your check-up, talk about any allergies or reactions that you have had to your medicines.

What should I do at my first check-up?

Try to be open with your health care provider. You need to decide if you feel comfortable talking to and sharing information with your provider. You need to ask any questions that you may have. Write them down before your appointment so you don't forget! See how well the provider answers your questions and listens to you.

What if I am not happy with my providers?

Switch health care providers! Go through the same steps listed above to find a new provider. You should go to a health care provider that you trust and you feel comfortable with. Your provider should be patient and should show you respect.

How often should I see my primary health care provider?

You should check with your primary health care provider about how often you should have a regular check-up. You will need to be seen more often if you have special health care needs or if you are taking medication.

Good luck in your search for a primary health care provider!

Written by Lara Hauslaub, BA, and Rebecca Feinstein Winitzer, MS, LCSW.
Children's Hospital. Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine.
333 Longwood Avenue. Boston, MA 02115. (617) 355-7181

Developed by Children's Hospital, Boston, as part of the Massachusetts Initiative for Youth with Disabilities (MIYD), a Healthy and Ready to Work project of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. MIYD is supported in part by project # H01MC00006 from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (Title V, Social Security Act), Health Resources and Services Administration, Department of Health and Human Services.



Transitioning?

A Guide to Finding a Primary Health Care Provider

