



[Home](#) → [Medical Encyclopedia](#) → Choosing a primary care provider

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Choosing a primary care provider

A primary care provider (PCP) is a health care practitioner who sees people that have common medical problems. This person is most often a doctor. However, a PCP may be a physician assistant or a nurse practitioner. Your PCP is often involved in your care for a long time. Therefore, it is important to choose someone with whom you will work well.

Information

A PCP is your main health care provider in non-emergency situations. Your PCP's role is to:

- Provide preventive care and teach healthy lifestyle choices
- Identify and treat common medical conditions
- Assess the urgency of your medical problems and direct you to the best place for that care
- Make referrals to medical or surgical specialists when necessary

Primary care is most often provided in an outpatient setting. However, if you are admitted to the hospital, your PCP may assist in or direct your care, depending on the circumstances.

Having a PCP can give you a trusting, ongoing relationship with one medical professional over time. You can choose from several different types of PCPs:

- **Family practitioners:** Doctors who have completed a family practice (sometimes called family medicine) residency and are board-certified, or board-eligible, for this specialty. The scope of their practice includes children and adults of all ages and may include obstetrics and minor surgery.
- **Pediatricians:** Doctors who have completed a pediatric residency and are board-certified or board-eligible in this specialty. The scope of their practice includes the care of newborns, infants, children, and adolescents.
- **Geriatricians:** Doctors who have completed a residency in either family medicine or internal medicine and are board-certified in this specialty. They often serve as a PCP for older adults with complex medical needs related to aging.
- **Internists:** Doctors who have completed a residency in internal medicine and are board-certified or board-eligible in this specialty. The scope of their practice includes the care of adults of all ages for many different medical problems.
- **Obstetricians/gynecologists:** Doctors who have completed a residency and are board-certified or board-eligible in this specialty. They often serve as a PCP for women, particularly those of childbearing age.
- **Nurse practitioners (NP) and physician assistants (PA):** Practitioners who go through a different training and certification process than doctors. They may be your PCP in some practices.

Many insurance plans limit the providers you can choose from, or provide financial incentives for you to select from a specific list of providers. Make sure you know what your insurance covers before starting to narrow down your options.

When choosing a PCP, also consider the following:

- Is the office staff friendly and helpful? Is the office good about returning calls?
- Are the office hours convenient to your schedule?
- How easy is it to reach the provider? Does the provider use email or secure messaging through a patient portal?
- Do you prefer a provider whose communication style is friendly and warm, or more formal?
- Do you prefer a provider focused on disease treatment, or wellness and prevention?
- Does the provider have a conservative or aggressive approach to treatment?
- Does the provider order a lot of tests?
- Does the provider refer to other specialists frequently or infrequently?
- What do colleagues and patients say about the provider?
- Does the provider invite you to be involved in your care? Does the provider view your patient-provider relationship as a true partnership?

You can get referrals to a PCP from:

- Friends, neighbors, or relatives
- State-level medical associations, nursing associations, and associations for physician assistants
- Your dentist, pharmacist, optometrist, previous provider, or other health professional
- Advocacy groups may be especially helpful to find the best provider for a specific chronic condition or disability
- Health plans, such as HMOs or PPOs, which have websites, directories, or customer service staff who can help you select a PCP who is right for you

Another option is to request an appointment to "interview" a potential provider. There may be no cost to do this, or you may be charged a co-payment or other small fee. Some practices, particularly pediatric practice groups, may have an open house where you have an opportunity to meet several of the providers in that particular group.

If a health care problem comes up and you do not have a primary provider, in most cases, it is best to seek non-emergency care from an urgent care center rather than a hospital emergency room. This will often save you time and money. In recent years, many emergency rooms have expanded their services to include urgent care within the emergency room itself or an adjoining area. To find out, contact the hospital first.

Alternative Names

Family doctor - how to choose one; Primary care provider - how to choose one; Doctor - how to choose a family doctor

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