

MLAP Patient Guide

The healthcare system in the United States involves a complex mixture of public and private insurers, hospitals, and health providers, but it can be very expensive and difficult to access. This patient guide will advise you on how to navigate the healthcare system to quickly get the care you need at an affordable price.

1. Getting Started

Is your condition emergent, urgent, or routine?

- If your condition is emergent (life-threatening), dial 9-1-1 immediately to go to an emergency department.
 - [Examples](#) include heart attack, stroke, gunshot wounds, major car accidents, bone fractures, appendicitis, severe allergic reactions, uncontrollable bleeding, head trauma, or uncontrollable vomiting.
- If your condition is urgent (must be treated within 24 hours), go to an urgent care center or emergency department. Keep in mind that it will usually cost less to go to an urgent care center, but if your condition is emergent, you may be transferred to an emergency department.
- If your condition is routine (could wait a few weeks), schedule an appointment with a primary care provider, who focuses on preventive care, diagnosing conditions, and managing acute and chronic illnesses. Some health insurance plans require that you see a primary care provider before seeing a specialist doctor.

2. Finding a Doctor

Do you have insurance?

- If you don't have insurance, you should consider community health clinics (free or low cost), walk-in clinics, or cash-only clinics.
 - You can find free and low-cost clinics in your area using [FreeClinics.com](https://www.freeclinics.com).
 - You can find cash prices for [new patient visits](#) or [emergency visits](#) at Turquoise Health. Make sure you click "Sort by cost", so you see your low-cost options first.
 - You can also call clinics and urgent care centers to determine the relative prices of your local options. To find physicians, try using U.S. News & World Report's [Doctor Finder](#) Tool.
 - If you plan to reside in the United States, consider looking into your health insurance options with [HealthCare.gov](https://www.healthcare.gov).
- If you have insurance, you should call your insurance provider to find an urgent care center or physician who will accept your insurance. This can lower your costs significantly, but make sure you call the doctor's office to confirm your coverage.

- Ask the clinic, “Do you accept this plan?” Make sure you tell them your specific plan, not just the name of your insurance provider.
- You can also ask your coworkers or peers if you get your insurance through your school or employer; they may have the same coverage.

Do you have any preferences for who you’ll be seeing?


- If you would like to see a physician who can speak another language, we are currently developing a search tool that will assist you.
- Consider checking online reviews, keeping in mind that people may be more likely to review negative experiences than positive ones.
- Large hospitals or clinics will have more doctors who may be able to provide a second opinion if your doctor is not sure.
- Look into your transportation options using [Google Maps](#).

Once you have a provider in mind, you can schedule your appointment by calling or emailing your doctor’s office. Your doctor may have a few “walk-in” slots available. When you’ve secured an appointment, write it down somewhere important so that you’ll remember.

Note that wait times for outpatient appointments are highly variable, depending on the doctor, the clinic, or specialty. You may have to call multiple offices to find a time that works for you.

3. Getting to Your Appointment

How will you meet with your doctor?

- If you’re meeting with your doctor online, make sure you have a digital device (computer, phone, tablet) that has the online meeting software, camera, and microphone needed for your appointment.
- If you will go to your doctor’s office, check [Google Maps](#) to determine how long it’ll take you to get there.
 - If you have a car, note your estimated drive time and see if there is any parking nearby. You can also call your doctor’s office to confirm parking space availability.
 - If you do not have a car, consider using public transportation or ride sharing services like Uber or Lyft. [Google Maps](#) provides directions to using public transportation ( Transit) that you can adjust to match the time that you plan to arrive at the doctor’s office. Keep in mind that the average primary care visit takes [up to 20 minutes](#), but your visit may be significantly longer or shorter.

Make sure you plan to arrive at least a few minutes early, especially with public transportation or ride sharing, in case there are any delays. If this is your first visit at the office, arrive at least 15 minutes early to fill out paperwork.

4. At the Doctor's Office

Explaining your symptoms thoroughly is important so that your doctor can diagnose your condition accurately, prescribe the correct treatment, and help you recover quickly and safely.

- Write down your symptoms and how long they've been occurring before your appointment. Use specific, detailed, and descriptive vocabulary.
 - Are the symptoms constant? If not, when do you usually experience them?
 - Does anything make the symptoms better or worse?
 - Do the symptoms affect your daily activities?
- Write down all of your medications or take photos of your prescription bottles, including over-the-counter drugs, herbal remedies, or supplements. Also note any drug allergies or reactions you've had.
- Keep in mind that your visit may not be long enough to cover all of your health problems, so prioritize the most important three conditions.

What to expect at the doctor's office:

- Check in with the front desk and confirm your personal information, such as your address, phone number, and insurance coverage.
- You may see multiple types of well-qualified health providers (nurse practitioners, physician assistants, or physicians), especially for unscheduled appointments.
- Be flexible in case your doctor is running late. They may be speaking with another patient or filling out documentation for each visit. You can bring a crossword puzzle or book ahead of time.
- If time away from work is an issue, many clinics are also open on weekends.
- If your doctor recommends any procedures or tests, make sure that your insurance will cover them. If not, check with the billing office to determine the costs.

5. After Your Visit

If your doctor diagnoses you with a condition or helps you develop a treatment plan, here are some ways to learn more about that. Several patient-friendly encyclopedias can help you understand your diagnosis or treatment.

Diagnoses:

- [University of Rochester Medical Center Encyclopedia](#)
- [American Cancer Society](#)
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)

Treatments:

- [University of Rochester Medical Center Encyclopedia](#)
- [A.D.A.M. Medical Encyclopedia](#) (U.S. National Library of Medicine)

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Disclaimer: Medical Literacy and Access Project has no financial or other interests to disclose.

References

Here are some additional resources that we consulted to create this guide. We recommend that you look into these further.

Finding a Doctor

- [WikiHow's Nurse-Written Guide to Finding a Physician](#)
- [WikiHow's Nurse-Written Guide to Scheduling an Appointment](#)

Explaining Your Symptoms

- [National Institutes of Health \(U.S.\)](#)
- [wikiHow's Nurse Practitioner-written Guide](#)
- [US News Health Team's Physician-written Guide](#)

What to Expect

- [New York Times](#)