

Published on *SeniorNavigator* (<https://seniornavigator.org>)

Choosing a Doctor

Finding a main doctor (often called your primary doctor or primary care doctor) who you feel comfortable talking to is the first step in good communication. How well you and your doctor talk to each other is one of the most important steps to getting good health care. This doctor gets to know you and what your health is normally like. He or she can [help you make medical decisions](#) that suit your values and daily habits and can keep in touch with the other medical specialists and healthcare providers you may need.

Taking an active role in your health care puts the responsibility for good communication on both you and your doctor. This means asking questions if the doctor's explanations or instructions are unclear, bringing up problems even if the doctor doesn't ask, and letting the doctor know if you have concerns about a particular treatment or change in your daily life.

If you don't have a primary doctor or are not at ease with the one you currently see, now may be the time to find a new doctor. Whether you just moved to a new city, changed insurance providers, or had a bad experience with your doctor or medical staff, it is worthwhile to spend time finding a doctor you can trust.

People sometimes hesitate to change doctors because they worry about hurting their doctor's feelings. But doctors understand that different people have different needs. They know it is important for everyone to have a doctor with whom they are comfortable.

Primary care physicians frequently are family practitioners, internists, or geriatricians. A geriatrician is a doctor who specializes in older people, but family practitioners and internists may also have a lot of experience with older patients. Here are some suggestions that can help you find a doctor who meets your needs.

Decide what you are looking for in a doctor

A good first step is to make a list of qualities that matter to you. Do you care if your doctor is a man or a woman? Is it important that your doctor has evening office hours, is associated with a specific hospital or medical center, or speaks your language? Do you prefer a doctor who has an individual practice or one who is part of a group so you can see one of your doctor's partners if your doctor is not available? After you have made your list, go back over it and decide which qualities are most important and which are nice, but not essential.

Make a list of several possible doctors

Once you have a general sense of what you are looking for, ask friends and relatives, medical specialists, and other health professionals for the names of doctors with whom they have had good experiences. Rather than just getting a name, ask about the person's experiences. For example, say: *"What do you like about Dr. Smith?"* and *"Does this doctor take time to answer questions?"* A doctor whose name comes up often may be a strong possibility.

If you belong to a managed care plan — a health maintenance organization (HMO) or preferred provider organization (PPO) — you may be required to choose a doctor in the plan or else you may have to pay extra to see a doctor outside the network. Most managed care plans will provide information on their doctors' backgrounds and credentials. Some plans have websites with lists of participating doctors from which you can choose.

It may be helpful to develop a list of a few names you can choose from. As you find out more about the doctors on this list, you may rule out some of them. In some cases, a doctor may not be taking new patients and you may have to make another choice.

What are HMOs and PPOs?

Members of a health maintenance organization (HMO) pay a set monthly fee no matter how many (or few) times they see a doctor. Usually there are no deductibles or claims forms, but you will have a co-payment for doctor visits and prescriptions. Each member chooses a primary care doctor from within the HMO network. The primary care doctor coordinates all care and, if necessary, refers members to specialists.

A preferred provider organization (PPO) is a network of doctors and other health care providers. The doctors in this network agree to provide medical services to PPO health plan members at discounted costs. Members can choose to see any doctor at any time. Choosing a non-PPO provider is called “going out of network” and will cost more than seeing a member of the PPO network.

Gather information from the web

The [American Medical Association’s Doctor Finder website](#) and the [American Board of Medical Specialties’ Certification Matters database](#) can help you find doctors in your area. These websites don’t recommend individual doctors, but they do provide a list of doctors you may want to consider. MedlinePlus, a website from the National Library of Medicine at NIH, has a [comprehensive list of directories](#), which may also be helpful. For a list of doctors who participate in Medicare, visit the [Medicare.gov Physician Compare tool](#).

Don’t forget to call your local or State medical society to check if complaints have been filed against any of the doctors you are considering.

What is a “board certified” doctor?

Doctors who are board certified have extra training after regular medical school. They also have passed an exam certifying their expertise in specialty areas. Examples of specialty areas are general internal medicine, family medicine, geriatrics, gynecology, and orthopedics. The American Board of Medical Specialties has a [database of all board-certified physicians](#) that is updated daily. You can also call to verify a doctor’s certification at **866-275-2267**. Board certification is one way to learn about a doctor’s medical expertise; it doesn’t tell you about the doctor’s communication skills.

Collect information about the doctors you are considering

Once you have narrowed your list to two or three doctors, call their offices. The office staff is a good source of information about the doctor’s education and qualifications, office policies, and payment procedures. Pay attention to the office staff — you will have to communicate with them often!

You may want to set up an appointment to meet and talk with a doctor you are considering. He or she is likely to charge you for such a visit. After the appointment, ask yourself if this doctor is a person with whom you could work well. If you are not satisfied, schedule a visit with one of your other candidates.

When learning about a doctor, consider asking questions like:

- Do you have many older patients?
- How do you feel about involving my family in care decisions?
- Can I call or email you or your staff when I have questions? Do you charge for telephone or email time?
- What [telehealth services](#) do you offer?
- What are your thoughts about complementary or alternative treatments, such as...?

Choose a doctor

When making a decision about which doctor to choose, you might want to ask yourself questions like:

- Did the doctor give me a chance to ask questions?
- Was the doctor really listening to me?
- Could I understand what the doctor was saying? Was I comfortable asking him or her to say it again?

Once you've chosen a doctor, make your first actual care appointment. This visit may include a medical history and a physical exam. Be sure to bring your medical records, or have them sent from your former doctor. Bring a [list of your current medicines](#) or put the medicines in a bag and take them with you. If you haven't already met the doctor, ask for extra time during this visit to ask any questions you have about the doctor or the practice.

For More Information

American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine

190 North Independence Mall West

Philadelphia, PA 19106-1572

800-523-1546

www.acponline.org

American Geriatrics Society

40 Fulton Street, 18th Floor

New York, NY 10038

800-247-4779

www.americangeriatrics.org

American Medical Association

515 North State Street

Chicago, IL 606154

800-621-8335

www.ama-assn.org

American Osteopathic Association

142 East Ontario Street

Chicago, IL 60611

800-621-1773

www.osteopathic.org

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

7500 Security Boulevard

Baltimore, MD 21244-1850

800-MEDICARE (800-633-4227)

www.medicare.gov

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

800-222-2225

800-222-4225 (TTY)

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Article Source

National Institute on Aging

Source URL

<https://www.nia.nih.gov>

Last Reviewed

Sunday, July 14, 2024