

How to Find the Right Primary Care Doctor for You

It makes sense to establish a relationship with a primary care doctor before you need immediate medical treatment. That way you have a chance to think about what kind of doctor you want, find one who meets your needs, and take advantage of preventive care. You also get to know one another and establish a good working relationship. It may seem like it's going to be a tough task at first, but finding the right primary care doctor is easier when you know what steps to follow. It's well worth a little work, because in the long run, having a primary care doctor will directly benefit your health.

What am I looking for?

Your primary care doctor is your health care partner for preventive care, medical treatment, and referrals to specialists, if needed. A primary care doctor can be a general or family practitioner (for all ages), a pediatrician (for infants, children and adolescents), or an internist (for adults). In Washington state, you may also receive primary care from a nurse practitioner (NP), a registered nurse who has received additional training to provide primary care directly to patients and who may practice independently or in a doctor's office. Your primary care doctor will likely work with a team of other health care professionals, so you may be seen primarily by a nurse practitioner or a physician assistant (PA).

First, find a high performing medical group or clinic

The quality of health care varies among doctors. At www.wacommunitycheckup.org, you can compare the performance of Puget Sound area medical groups and clinics to help you choose one or to see how well your current one is doing. Then, choose a doctor at a high-performing health care provider.

Give it some thought

- If you have a family, do you want to have one doctor for your whole family or are you looking for a pediatrician for your children and an internist for you?
- Do you want your doctor's office to be near home or work?
- Do you want a doctor who has a special focus on a medical condition that you might have, such as diabetes?
- Do you have a preference for a male or female doctor? An older or a younger doctor?
- Do you need a doctor that speaks a language besides English?
- Do you want a doctor who offers evening or weekend appointments?

Get some names

- Ask friends and relatives who their doctors are and what they like about them.
- Ask your dentist or a medical specialist you are seeing to recommend a primary care doctor.

- See if your local hospital has a referral service.
- Search a list of doctors covered by your health insurance company.

Call your insurance company

- Ask if your health insurance company covers the doctor you'd like to see.

Call the office to narrow the list

- Is the doctor taking new patients?
- Do they file the insurance claims for you?
- What types of payment do they accept?
- What are the office hours?
- How far in advance do you need to make appointments?
- How many doctors are in the practice?
- Who sees patients if the doctor is out of town or not available?
- What hospital does the doctor send patients to?
- How long is the usual office visit?
- Is lab work done in the office or nearby?
- What options do you have for communicating with the doctor? Can you email or call?
- You will also want to ask about the doctor's education, training and Board certification. And along the way, you will get a feel for the office staff and how welcome questions are.

Schedule your first visit

- Did you feel comfortable talking to the doctor?
- Did you get answers to your questions?
- Did you understand the doctor's explanations?
- Did you have enough time to ask all your questions?
- Do you sense this is someone you can trust?

Your primary care doctor is your partner in health

Over time, your health care needs may change or you may face a new health challenge. If you need to work with other doctors because of a particular condition, your primary care doctor can be the one medical professional who will be able to understand all the tests, medicines, and treatments you are getting and help you with any problems. Your primary care doctor will be able to help you throughout the years because he or she will know you and your health history.

Find and visit a primary care doctor you trust.