

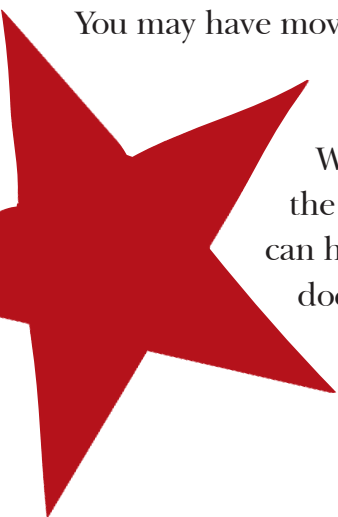
AgePage

Choosing a Doctor

Mrs. Wiley had a big surprise the other day when she called her doctor's office to make an appointment. The receptionist told her that Dr. Horowitz was retiring at the end of the year. After all this time — after the doctor had treated her for strep throat, bladder infections, and that nasty broken wrist; after helping her through menopause — she felt like she was losing a trusted friend. Mrs. Wiley worried that she wouldn't be able to find a new doctor she would like.

There are many reasons why you might be looking for a new doctor. You may have moved to another city, or your doctor could be retiring.

Whatever the reason, the following ideas can help you find a doctor who is right for you.



What Type of Doctor?

For your primary care doctor, you might want a general or family practitioner, an internist, or a geriatrician.

- ◆ General practitioners provide health care for a wide range of medical problems. They do not focus on any one area of medicine.
- ◆ Family practitioners are similar to general practitioners, with extra training on health care for all family members, regardless of age.
- ◆ Internists are doctors for adults. Some internists take additional training to become specialists. For example, cardiologists are internists who specialize in diseases of the heart.
- ◆ Geriatricians specialize in the care of older adults. A geriatrician is trained in family practice or internal medicine, but has additional training in caring for older people.

Finding a New Doctor

Once you have a sense of what kind of doctor you need, ask people you

know about doctors they use and like. Friends, coworkers, and other health professionals

may be helpful.

You can make it easier for them to tell you about the doctors they like by asking questions such as, “What do you like about your doctor?”

A doctor whose name comes up often might be a good one to try. It may help to have several names to choose from in case the doctor you select is not taking new patients or does not take part in your health insurance plan. If you need more help finding names of doctors, contact a local hospital or medical center, medical society, physician referral service, or nearby medical schools.

If you belong to a managed care plan, you can get a list of doctors from the plan’s membership services office. Your choices will be limited to the doctors who are part of the plan.

What does Medicare cover?

Most people age 65 and older are eligible for Medicare hospital insurance (Part A). They also can enroll in Medicare medical insurance (Part B) for a monthly fee. Medicare medical insurance helps pay for visits to the doctor. It also covers many other medical services and supplies not covered by Medicare's Part A.

Medicare prescription drug coverage (Part D) is a voluntary Medicare program that helps pay for both brand name and generic prescription drugs at participating area pharmacies. Everyone with Medicare can get this coverage. There is a monthly fee and a deductible cost. Patients must select among the drug plans available in their area.

There are many different Medicare plans. Their benefits, costs, and rules vary. Be sure to compare each plan and consider the type of insurance that is best for you. For information about Medicare benefits, call the Social Security Administration office listed in your phone book. Or call the toll-free Medicare hotline at 800-MEDICARE (800-633-4227/toll-free). Information about Medicare eligibility, enrollment, insurance plans, and more is also available online at *www.medicare.gov*.

When Your Doctor Stops Seeing Patients

Often when a doctor leaves a medical practice, he or she can arrange for you to see another doctor who will have access to all your medical records. You should go for an office visit with the new doctor before deciding if you want him or her to be your physician.

What Should You Look for in a Doctor?

Of course you want a doctor who is well trained and capable. But, in addition, a doctor who takes the time to know you well may be able to help you prevent some health problems and manage problems that do come up. Once you have chosen two or three doctors, call their offices. The office staff can give you information about the doctor's education and training. You can say, "Before I make an appointment, I have some questions about the office and the practice. Can I speak to an office manager or a nurse?" They can tell you about office policies, standard insurance the office takes, whether or not they file the insurance claims for

you, payment methods, and the hospitals where the doctor sends patients. When choosing a new doctor you may want to know about:

- ◆ *Board certification.* Board certified doctors have extra training after medical school to become specialists in a field of medicine such as family practice, internal medicine, or geriatrics.
- ◆ *Communication.* Because communication is important to good health care, you want a doctor who will listen carefully to your concerns, answer your questions, and explain things clearly and fully.
- ◆ *Type of health insurance.* Does the doctor accept Medicare? See the section on Medicare for more information.
- ◆ *The location of the doctor's office.* Will it be easy for you to get there? Is there parking?
- ◆ *Lab work.* Will I need to go to another location for blood tests or are lab tests done in the doctor's office?
- ◆ *Group practice.* If this is a group practice, who are the

other doctors and what are their specialties?

- ◆ *Coverage.* Who sees patients for the doctor if he or she is out of town or not available?

How Do You Make a Good Choice?

Find out as much as you can about the doctor and the practice. Here are more questions you may want to ask the office staff:

- ◆ Does the doctor see many older patients?
- ◆ Does the doctor see patients who have many health problems?
- ◆ Does the doctor refer patients to other doctors for special problems?
- ◆ Does the doctor treat many patients with the same chronic health problem that I have (for example, diabetes)?

The First Appointment

After choosing a doctor, make your first medical appointment. Before going to the doctor's office, write

down any questions you may have. It's a good idea to bring a list of your medicines. Include

both prescription and over-the-counter drugs, even vitamins, supplements, and eye drops. The nurse is often the first person you'll talk to in the office. The nurse usually takes your blood pressure and asks about your medications. If you're having a problem with a medicine, the nurse will explain how to take it.

During your first visit, the doctor will probably take a medical history and ask questions about your health and the medical history of people in your family. The doctor will examine you. If you go to a new doctor, be sure to bring your past medical records or have them sent. Your former doctor may charge you for this service. Make a list of any drug allergies or serious drug reactions you've had. During this visit, take time to ask any questions you may still have about the doctor and the practice.

For instance, ask the doctor:

- ◆ Will you give me written instructions about my care?
- ◆ May I bring a family member (spouse, daughter, or son) to my office visits?
- ◆ Are you willing to talk with my family about my condition?
- ◆ Will you maintain my privacy if I ask you not to discuss my condition with anyone else?

After the meeting, ask yourself if you felt comfortable and confident with this doctor. Were you at ease asking questions? Did the doctor clearly answer your questions? If you are not sure, schedule a visit with one of the other doctors on your list.

Once you have found a doctor you like, your job is not finished. A good doctor-patient relationship is a partnership. Both you and your doctor need to work together to solve your medical problems and maintain your good health.

Finding a doctor that suits your needs is an important first step. Good communication with the doctor and the office staff is key.

For More Information

American Academy of Family Physicians

11400 Tomahawk Creek Parkway

Leawood, KS 66211-2672

800-274-2237 (toll-free)

www.familydoctor.org

American College of Physicians-

American Society of Internal Medicine

190 North Independence Mall West

Philadelphia, PA 19106-1572

800-523-1546 (toll-free)

www.acponline.org

American Geriatrics Society

350 Fifth Avenue, Suite 801

New York, NY 10118

American Geriatrics Society Referral

800-247-4779 (toll-free)

www.americangeriatrics.org

American Medical Association

515 North State Street

Chicago, IL 60610

800-621-8335 (toll-free)

www.ama-assn.org

American Osteopathic Association

142 East Ontario Street

Chicago, IL 60611

800-621-1773 (toll-free)

www.osteopathic.org

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

7500 Security Boulevard

Baltimore, MD 21244-1850

800-MEDICARE (800-633-4227/toll-free)

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

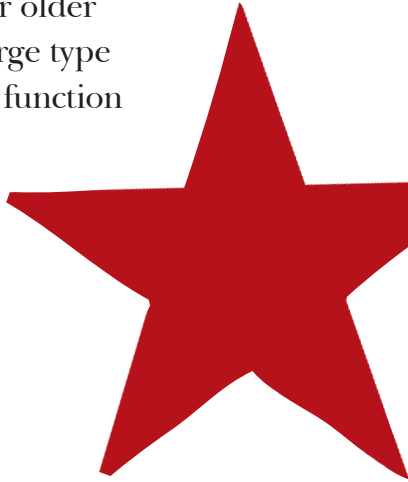
800-222-2225 (toll-free)

800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

www.nia.nih.gov

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