



Center for Young Women's Health
www.youngwomenshealth.org



Children's Hospital Boston

Choosing a Primary Health Care Provider (PCP): A Guide for Teens

Congratulations on taking the first step to care for your health! Looking for information on how to find a primary health care provider (PCP) is a smart decision, because seeing one routinely is a very important part of taking care of yourself. If you are interested in finding a health care provider, but don't really know how to go about finding one, then this guide is for you. By the end of this guide, you should be ready to choose a PCP of your own!

Why do I Need A PCP?

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You need a PCP so that your health can be checked regularly to catch any problems early on (*so that they do not become worse*). Your PCP can help you make smart choices to stay healthy. He or she can talk with you about health risks such as smoking, alcohol, sex, seat belts, and nutrition, and give you advice about treatments. If you have a serious or unusual medical problem, your PCP can refer you to a specialist, someone who knows much more about that specific kind of problem.

Who are PCPs?

A PCP can be a doctor, nurse-practitioner, or physician's assistant (PA). Nurse-practitioners and PA's are trained to perform many parts of primary care.

Nurse-practitioners are required to work with a doctor or physician in some states, but can work alone in others. They perform regular check-ups and help with your problems.

PA's are required to work with a doctor, and are often good primary care providers. Almost all are trained by physicians, and they have a special license to practice medicine. One of the advantages to choosing a PA is that there may be more time for counseling and questions.

Both nurse-practitioners and physician's assistants have some limits as to what they are allowed to do. Call the provider's office, and ask what the nurse-practitioner or physician's assistant cannot

do that a physician or doctor can do. See if the differences are important to you.

How to Find a Primary Health Care Provider

What should I look for in a PCP?

Decide if you want your health care provider to be a woman or a man, or if it doesn't matter. You should feel comfortable with your PCP, since it is important to share personal information and any health problems with him/her. You need to find a health care provider who will listen to your concerns and answer your questions, and takes the time to explain things clearly to you. It's a good idea to try to find a health care provider who has an office near where you live or go to school.

What if I've turned 13 and I want a new provider that sees teenagers?

You should ask your pediatrician if there is someone in her/his office that sees teenagers, or if there are special hours for teens to be seen in the office. If not, ask your pediatrician for names of other providers who see teens. Talk with your pediatrician about how to let your parents know about your health care needs.

How do I find the names of health care providers?

You should first make a list of names of health care providers. You can do this by asking your parents, friends, and relatives for the names of health care providers that they go to and like. Make sure that the person has gone to that health care provider more than once.

There are other ways to find a provider. You can check the "Physician Select" service of the Web Site of the American Medical Association, at www.ama-assn.org. You can call a doctor referral service at a hospital or a local medical society.

Health Plans and Health Care Providers

What if I belong to a health plan?

If you belong to a health plan, your choice of health care providers may be limited to providers that are part of the plan. Sometimes you can choose to see any provider. You should check the plans list of health care providers. Ask friends or relatives who have the same plan as you for names of health care providers that they like.

What if I don't belong to a health plan?

If you don't belong to a health plan, your choice of providers is much greater. You may want to first think about which provider you would like to use. Check on how much a typical office visit and lab tests cost. If it doesn't fit your budget, check on public health clinics, family planning clinics, and sliding scales and free care in hospital clinics.

Qualifications of Health Care Providers

Is there a way I can check on how qualified a provider is?

Yes, you have a few options. You can go by what your friends or relatives say. You can also call the provider's office and ask the office staff what the providers credentials are. Every provider should be licensed to provide care by the state in which they work.

A way to find information on the quality of care of different providers is to go to the website: www.docboard.org.

You can find out if a provider is board certified by calling The American Board of Medical Specialties at (800) 776-2378 or checking the website abms.org. "Certified" means that the provider has finished a training program in one area of medicine and has passed an exam (*board*) that tests her or his knowledge, skills, and experience to provide quality care.

Deciding On a Primary Health Care Provider

How do I decide on one PCP?

Once you have made a list of qualified providers, you might want to try calling their offices and asking a few questions. The way that the staff answers your questions can say a lot about the provider. You first need to find out if the provider is covered by your health plan and if he/she is taking new patients. If you don't know if the provider is board certified or what their training is, ask!

Some other questions you might ask include:

- Which hospitals does the provider work in?
- What are the office hours (*when is the provider available, and when can I speak to office staff*)?
- Does the provider or someone else in the office speak the language that I am most comfortable speaking?
- How many other providers can see me when my primary care provider is not there? Who are they?
- How long does it usually take to get an appointment with my provider?
- What are the provider's fees? Do I need to pay when I am at the provider's office or will I be sent a bill?
- What do I do if I need to cancel an appointment?
- What do I do if I have an emergency or if I need medical help after-hours?
- Does the provider give advice over the phone for common medical problems?
- Can I contact my provider by e-mail?

The answers to these questions should help you decide which provider you want to handle your care. Once you like what you hear, make an appointment with that provider for a general check-up.

Check-Ups

Do I need to bring anything to my first check-up?

You should take a copy of your health records, including your immunization record (*a list of all the vaccines you have had, and the dates you received them*). You can get these records from your old provider, or maybe from your school. Also, bring any medicines you are taking, or bring a list of them. At your check-up, talk about any allergies or reactions that you have had to your medicines.

What will happen at my check-up?

Your PCP will ask you questions about your general health, such as headaches, sore throats, infections, and stomachaches. She/he will also ask you about your gynecologic history, such as when you started your period, how often you have them, and whether you have ever had a sexual partner or sexual intercourse. She/he will also ask you about your health habits, such as if you smoke, drink, or use seat belts. You will also be asked about your

nutrition, stress level, family history, and moods, such as depression. Check-ups will also include measuring your height, weight, and blood pressure. Your ears, eyes, throat, neck, heart, breasts, and abdomen (*stomach*) will also be checked.

During your teen years, you'll get a diphtheria and tetanus shot booster (*every 10 years*), 3 hepatitis B shots, a booster of mumps, measles, and rubella (*MMR*), and a chickenpox shot (*if you haven't had the disease*). Before you travel abroad to countries in Latin America, Asia, or Africa, you should get the Hepatitis A vaccine. Before you start your freshman year in college, you should talk with your health care provider about getting the meningococcal vaccine to lessen your risk of getting the very serious infection meningitis (*inflammation of the brain tissue*).

What should I do at my first check-up?

Try to be open with your health care provider. You need to decide if you feel comfortable talking to and sharing information with him/her. You also need to ask any questions that you may have. Write them down before your appointment so you don't forget! You might want to bring someone along to help you ask these questions. See how well the provider listens to you and answers them. Are you happy with the provider at the end of your visit?

Confidentiality and My Health Care Provider

How do I ask about confidentiality?

Before or at your first visit with your PCP, ask about confidentiality. This is very important and can be hard to bring up. Ask if your health care provider will keep information private about your sexual history, contraception, and other worries. Discuss what your health care provider and you will do when there is something important, like a serious illness, depression, or life-threatening condition, which should be shared with your parents or someone else. Start the discussion when you are 12 or 13 years old, or at the first visit.

Practice some questions to ask your provider, such as:

- What happens to the bills from my visits here or to a gynecologist in the community?
- If I'm covered by my parents' insurance, will they find out about examinations and tests that are done on me?
- What if I need birth control?

- Can you tell me what happens to my lab test results? Who do you call?
- What if I want to be tested for STDs or HIV?
- What if you find out that I have a STD?
- What if you find out that I am pregnant?
- Is there any information that you are obligated to tell my parents?
- What happens if I have a big problem and need help telling my parents?

Reproductive Health and Health Care Providers

Do all PCPs' also see adolescents and young women for reproductive health issues or Pap smears?

Some PCPs' do, but not all. You should discuss any reproductive health questions with your provider. If your provider does not see adolescents and young women for reproductive health issues, menstrual problems, contraception, pregnancy, or Pap smears, she/he will help you find someone that does. This might be a gynecologist or an adolescent medicine specialist in your community. If you are referred to a gynecologist, check to make sure she/he is an expert in providing care to teens. If it's important to you, make sure he/she provides confidential care (*be prepared to ask those confidentiality questions again*), contraception, and STD screening. You might also want to make sure that he/she gives impartial pregnancy counseling, meaning he/she gives you all the facts and discusses all of the issues so you can make an informed decision about what **you** want to do.

What if I Don't Like My Health Care Provider?

What if I don't like my PCP?

Switch health care providers! You should go to a health care provider that you trust and you feel comfortable with. Your provider should be patient and should show you respect.

Go through the same steps listed above to find a new provider. Make a list of names, check on qualifications, and call the providers' office to ask questions. Remember to check and see if the new providers that you are thinking about are part of your health plan. You should let your current provider know that you are changing providers. Make sure that you get any medical records that your provider may have, so you can bring them to your new provider.

How often should I see my PCP?

You should see your primary health care provider once a year for a regular check-up, and more often if you have other health problems or you are taking medication.

Women who have been sexually active for a few years, or are 21 years of age or older (*whichever comes first*) should have a pelvic exam once a year. A Pap test should also be done to make sure that there are no warning signs of cancer of the cervix.

Good luck in your search for a PCP!