
4

Finding the Best Doctor for You

CHAPTER PURPOSE:

To give you the necessary tools to find the ideal doctor.

PREMISE:

People often incorrectly assume that one doctor is just as right for them as any other doctor. Or, they think it is nearly impossible to really ask for what they want in a health care provider.

Taking care of your health is life-long job. It is a job that is 100 percent your responsibility. But you must not overlook the importance of picking a smart, reliable, and caring health care team to give you guidance, insight, and support in meeting your health care needs. Your health care team will include a primary care doctor or nurse practitioner, specialists, pharmacists, and other health practitioners.

Throughout this chapter you will find tips, strategies, and evaluation tools to help you build an all-star health care team.

PICKING THE BEST TEAM CAPTAIN

Every great team needs a great leader. Your health care team captain will be your primary care doctor or nurse practitioner. She will be the person you go

to see first when health problems arise. She will act as a wise dispatcher sending you to see the appropriate specialists if your health condition requires it. If you already have a primary care doctor or nurse practitioner that you are happy with, that's great! If not, here are some suggestions for how to find one.

Where to Look

The “best” team captain for you may not be that Harvard or Johns Hopkins trained doctor in the community, especially if this person is too busy or unable to relate to you. The first step to take in your search for Dr. “Right” is to ask around. Ask friends, family members, co-workers, or anyone else for good referrals. Certainly if you know someone in the health care field, go after them first for referrals. Also consider using the Internet in your search. Try going to www.familydoctor.org, www.healthfinders.gov, and a host of other Web sites on the Internet to help you find a potential doctor.

What to Find Out

Do some research on your own. Then, schedule a chat with your potential new primary care doctor. Look for answers to the following questions to convince yourself that he or she is the right health care provider and team captain for you.

- **Is she board-certified and licensed in my state?** This is a simple question to ask the doctor directly or office manager. A board-certified doctor is a doctor who has passed exams in a certain medical specialty. If you have access to the Internet, go to the American Board of Medical Specialties at www.abms.org or call at 1-866-275-2267 to check for yourself if the doctor is board certified. To find out if your doctor is licensed to practice medicine in your state go www.docboard.org and click on your state medical-licensing board.
- **Is this doctor accepting new patients?** The best doctor in the world won't do you any good if you have a medical need, but you can't see the doctor for six months to a year. But if you have time to wait for that special doctor who comes highly recommended, be persistent. Call his or her office periodically to find out if the doctor can accept you as a patient. Persistence usually pays off!

- **How many days of the week does the doctor see patients?** You want a doctor who at least sees patients three days a week. There are some great doctors who are very involved in important clinical research, management, and other professional activities. These non-patient-care responsibilities can unfortunately get in the way of you having access to them when you need to.
- **Where did the doctor go to medical school and residency?** You want to find a doctor who went to an accredited medical school and residency program. Medical schools and residency programs have to meet certain academic standards to be an accredited program.
- **Is this doctor considering retirement or relocation soon?** Ideally you want to find a doctor who's going to be practicing in your area for a while so a long-term relationship can be established. Going through the trouble of finding a great doctor then having to go somewhere else in a few years can be very painful and unhealthy.
- **Does the doctor accept my health insurance?** This is a simple and obvious question to ask. Clearly, you do not want to be stuck with a large bill just because someone at the front desk forgot to tell you that they do not accept your type of health insurance.
- **Is this doctor known for spending quality time to ensure that the patient understands his or her health problems?** This question is so important. If your health care provider does not take the time to explain, in simple terms, your health problems to you, how can you help manage them? Remember the day-to-day care of most health problems is mostly the patient's responsibility. So, you really need to get an understanding of what's going on from your doctor.
- **Is this doctor able to relate to a person of my ethnic background?** We all do not come from the same cultural background, share the same struggles, or interpret the world in the same way. Because of these differences, many misunderstandings can occur between two people who see and deal with the world differently. It is important to find a health care provider who understands who you are, where you are coming from, and how you express yourself.

- **Does this doctor speak my natural language?** The importance of your health care provider being able to speak your primary language needs no explanation. Two people trying to work together on the same problem with a language barrier between them is usually non-productive.
- **Does this doctor see patients at my preferred hospital?** Ask your doctor directly—or ask the office manager—at what hospitals does he or she have privileges to treat patients. After living in any city long enough, you will learn what hospitals you prefer, and what hospitals to avoid at all costs. Most doctors only see patients at certain hospitals, and if you end up in a hospital where your doctor does not have privileges to see patients, you will be on your own with a brand new doctor at your sickest moment.

Also, find out from your primary care doctor, in advance, who will be following you if you need to be in the hospital. A relatively new trend in health care is for some primary care doctors to *not* follow their patients when they need to be hospitalized. Instead, a hospitalist treats the patient and communicates with the patient's primary care doctor during the hospital stay. A hospitalist is a physician who practices in the hospital and usually does not have a private practice. The care that hospitalists provide in the hospital can be good because they are very experienced in treating acute illness. But of course, he or she will likely be a doctor that you have never met before.

TOOLS FOR CHOOSING A PHYSICIAN

Sometimes, just knowing how to do something or knowing the right questions to ask is not enough. We often need tools to go along with our know-how. Use the tools that follow (tables 4.1 and 4.2) to help sort out all the details that you'll gather on your search for the best doctor.

I suggest that you make several enlarged copies of these worksheets for future interviews with doctors. Or print them out from your Resource CD or download free copies from our Web site, www.HealthPower101.com.

Q&A List: Choosing a Health Care Provider

Answer the questions in this worksheet as you search for a doctor. Refer back to the preceding pages to help answer these questions.

Table 4.1 Q&A List: Choosing a Health Care Provider

Questions	Answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What type of doctor do I need? [A good doctor to start with if you're an adult is an internist, family practice physician, geriatrician, or doctor of osteopathic medicine (DOs).] 	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is he or she board certified and licensed to practice in my state? 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this doctor accepting new patients? 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If not accepting patients now, when might he or she be available?</i> _____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many days of the week does the doctor see patients? 	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where did the doctor go to medical school and residency? 	_____
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this doctor considering retirement or relocation soon? 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does he or she accept my insurance? 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this doctor known for spending quality time to ensure that the patient understands his or her health problems? 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this doctor able to relate to a person of my ethnic background? 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does this doctor speak my natural language? 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does he or she see patients at my preferred hospital? This may be a crucial question. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

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Ideally the answers to all of the questions in table 4.1 should be yes. But no health care provider will be perfect. You must decide which questions are the most important.

Post New Doctor Visit Quiz

Ask yourself these questions, after your initial visit to a new doctor, to figure out how you feel about this doctor and his or her office staff.

Table 4.2 New Doctor Visit Evaluation Quiz

Questions	Answers
• Were my questions answered and concerns addressed?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
• Did the doctor spend enough time addressing my concerns?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
• Did the doctor look in my eyes when speaking with me and show me basic respect?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
• Did the doctor appear organized?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
• Did the doctor appear relaxed and enjoying his work?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
• Would I feel comfortable working with this doctor?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Why? _____ _____
• How would I rate my overall impression of the doctor, on a scale of 1 to 10?	(Circle one number) 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10 (1 worst, 10 best)
• How would I rate my overall impression of the office, staff and facilities, on a scale of 1 to 10?	(Circle one number) 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10 (1 worst, 10 best)

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These questions and rating scales are not scientifically based. They are just provided to give you an objective way to evaluate your experience of seeing a new health care provider. Again, ideally the answers to all of the questions in table 4.2 should be yes. But no health care provider will be perfect. You must decide which questions are the most important.

PICKING THE BEST SPECIALIST

In most cases your specialist will be chosen for you by your primary care health provider. Your primary care health provider is the best person to make referrals to specialists because he will likely have the inside scoop on which specialist is really good. Additionally he may have an existing relationship with this person. Take it from me, it is important that your primary care health provider and the specialist actually like each other on a personal level. You don't want personality conflicts between two professionals to cripple communications between them about your health issues.

If you have the option of choosing your own specialist or are referred to one, the same evaluation tools used to find a best primary care doctor for you can be used. Remember that if you are referred to a specialist by your primary care doctor but don't feel the specialist is a good fit, don't hesitate to ask your primary doctor for another referral. You may also take it upon yourself to find a specialist of your choice.

THE DOCTOR'S VISIT

Finally, you have found your ideal doctor and you are ready for your first visit. Or maybe you already have a good doctor and are preparing for your next visit. Either way, it's time to make an appointment. One simple suggestion that I recommend you always follow is to try to book an appointment to see a doctor in the morning. That way, you're one of the doctor's first patients. Believe me, you'll get more time and attention.

More important than appointment time, however, is preparation. It's crucial to prepare yourself for the appointment so that you get the most out of the visit. One major complaint that doctors have about patients is that patients usually give too much unnecessary information when they try to describe their health problems. Furthermore, by going to the doctor unprepared, you are likely to forget what you want to ask.

The best way to maximize the effectiveness of your visit to the doctor and increase the chances that your doctor will make the right diagnosis is to go prepared. Remember, the right diagnosis could save your life! Use the next two forms to prepare yourself to visit your doctor and evaluate the experience if it's your first visit.

Tools for a Doctor's Visit

Doctor's Visit: Things to Do List

Fill in part 1 of this worksheet before your doctor's visit and part 2 at the end of your doctor's visit

Table 4.3 Doctor's Visit Worksheet

Part 1: Things to do before your visit

- List the topics you want to discuss with your physician (e.g., what is bothering you, what the purpose of the visit is):
-
- List items of personal and family history related to the topics you want to discuss (e.g., Have you ever had this problem before? How was the problem treated in the past? Is it common in your family?):
-
- Questions regarding your symptoms:
 - When did it start? _____
 - Where did it start? _____
 - How often does it occur? _____
 - Does anything make it better (e.g., medications or position)? _____
 - _____
 - Does anything make it worse? _____
 - _____
-
- Be prepared to give a urine sample. (**Don't** urinate before going to the doctor's office.)
-
- Take all your medications in their bottles or containers when you visit your doctor. This includes over-the-counter medications, vitamins, and herbal remedies. Remind the doctor if you need a prescription for your regular medicine.
-
- If you need to or feel it would be helpful, take a friend or relative with you to help ask questions and understand the answers.

Part 2:
Questions to ask your doctor after completing the medical interview—
if you don't feel comfortable completing this section,
ask your doctor to do it for you.

- What is my main problem (diagnosis)?

-
- Do I have anything that could be contagious?

-
- What do I need to do? How is this treated? What are the risks and benefits of this treatment?

-
- Why is it important for me to do this?

-
- When and how will I get the results of tests or procedures?

-
- How well do you think I'll do? What is my prognosis?

-
- Follow up: When is my next appointment? ___/___/___
(Schedule a health checkup at least yearly.)

-
- Referrals: Who else do I need to see?

Specialist name _____

Reason to see _____ Date to see ___/___/___

Specialist name _____

Reason to see _____ Date to see ___/___/___

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Get clarification of the doctor's comments. Summarize your understanding of what was discussed with your physician and ask if you have the right understanding of what has been said. Remember to use the New Doctor Visit Evaluation Quiz (table 4.2) after your first visit.

FINAL WORDS

I want to assure you that the methods we have covered will work in your favor. Following these suggestions aids your doctor in dealing with your health issues. They also ensure that you enter into a healthy relationship with a doctor.

As a physician, I am not threatened by the idea of being interviewed as a potential health care provider. To the contrary, I, along with many other health care providers, would be impressed with a patient taking his or her health care so seriously. Trust me, physicians take patients more seriously when the patient is more serious about her health.