

Choosing the Best Doctor for You

By Judith S. Parnes, L.C.S.W., C.M.C

We all need the services of a physician, even if it is just for routine check-ups. Doctor's personalities, styles, backgrounds and approaches are just as varied as anyone else's. Many people do not give much thought to choosing a doctor, depending on word of mouth, listings in the phone book or their health insurance directories. However, having the right doctor for you can be crucial.

Being in partnership with your doctor is the best way to ensure you maintain one of your most precious commodities: your health. When you and your physician know each other, are comfortable with each other and can communicate well, you are ahead of the game in forestalling problems, identifying issues that arise and effectively dealing with any health problems you do encounter.

First Things First

Identify what is important to YOU in a doctor, what is going to best meet your personal needs. Of course you want someone who is skilled. But personality is important, too. Do you want someone who is relaxed and informal? Or do you prefer a more business-like approach? Do you want someone who is warm and friendly or more serious? Do you want a lot of information or just the facts?

Professional philosophy matters as well. Some people like the doctor to be in charge and other people like to have a significant say in the management of their own health care. Not every doctor is comfortable with patients who have strong feelings about their treatment. It is essential to determine if you are a good match early on.

Research

Do some research. Ask friends for recommendations and ask why they like their particular doctor. Talk to other health care professionals. They are privy to firsthand experience with a physician's skills and demeanor.

If you have a managed care insurance plan, check with the Customer Service department to verify the physician you are interested in is in network. Calling your insurance company is preferable for obtaining the most up-to-date information.

Do an Internet check as well. Most states have an online database that can provide you with information about a doctor's board certification, any lawsuits that have been filed and any disciplinary actions that have been taken.

Contact

Call the doctor's office and ask for an introductory appointment. This is your chance to meet the doctor in a business-like setting, ask questions and get a feel for what he or she is like. If the office is unable or unwilling to set up such an appointment, that will also send you a clear message regarding your future ability to access your physician.

This is your opportunity to verify other details such as what hospitals the doctor is affiliated with, how can you get in touch after hours and who covers for the doctor when they are away.

You will also have an opportunity to assess the office staff. The way the support staff treats the patients can be just as important as the doctor themselves, especially in regards to obtaining appointments and referrals.

Some doctor's will charge for this visit, but some do offer a brief complementary meeting. It is important to them as well to ensure you both are a good fit for each other. You want do that when you are well because the worst time to find out you are not compatible is when you are already sick!

A Great Beginning

Once you have decided on a particular physician, make an appointment for a well visit. Ask any additional questions you may have remembered since you first met.

Congratulations, you are off to a good start in cultivating a healthy future!

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