



A Checklist for Choosing Your Primary Care Doctor

Healthcare is a journey. The first stop in your healthcare travels is to make sure that you have a personal doctor, sometimes called a primary care provider or PCP. Your personal doctor can not only help you get better when you are sick, but can help you stay healthier overall. He or she will know your health history and can be your partner through every stop on your healthcare journey.

Choosing the right doctor is very important. This easy check list can help you find a high quality personal doctor (or PCP) that is right for you.

Step 1: Find a High Quality Practice

There are many things a physician practice (or doctors' office) can do to make sure you get the highest quality care. Going to a practice that provides quality care can help you be healthier - and stay safe.

- Visit www.mhmc.info.**
- Click on "Maine Doctor Ratings."**
- Read the disclaimer.** Then check the box that says "Yes, I have read and understand the disclaimer, please show me the results" and click on "view results" button.
- Choose the town where you would like to find a doctor.** On the top right of the screen, put your zip code in the space provided and choose how far you are willing to travel in the drop down box.
- Find 3 practices with either 2 or 3 blue ribbons (3 is best).** You can click on the practice name to get more information about their quality ratings. If you have diabetes or heart disease, it is important to go to a practice that earned a blue ribbon in that category.

Step 2: Learn More about the Providers

Now you have a list of 3 practices that provide high quality care. The next step is to learn more about the practice and the doctors who work there.

- Visit the website for the physician practice.** If the practice is a member of the Maine Health Management Coalition (MHMC), you can find the web address by clicking on the "Links to Helpful Websites" link at the bottom of the MHMC's home page (www.mhmc.info). You can also use a search engine to find the practice's web address.

- Learn more about the doctors at the practice.** Most practice websites will provide a list of providers and biographical information about each. Some websites will also say which doctors are currently accepting new patients.
- Make a list of doctors that you like.** Based on the information you find on the website, choose a few doctors that seem to be a good fit for you. What is important to you in a doctor? Gender, education and training, and areas of specialty are examples of things that are important to some people.
- Find out other important information about the practice.** You may want to know the office hours, if the practice has a pharmacy or lab on site, the physical location of the practice, or other information to help you make your choice.

Step 3: Call the Practice

After visiting the websites of the 3 high quality practices that you chose, you should have a list of anywhere from 3 to 10 doctors that you think might be a good fit for you. The next step in the process is to call the practice(s). While the staff person at the practice may not be able to recommend a specific doctor, you can still learn a lot from the phone call. As you ask each of your questions, think about how the call is going.

- Make a list of questions about the practice and how it handles patients.** What didn't you learn from the practice's website that you still would like to know in order to make your choice?
- Call the practice.**
- Introduce yourself and tell the practice why you are calling.** Here's an example of what you might say: *"Hi, my name is _____ and I am looking for a new doctor. Is there someone there that could answer a few questions about (Practice Name) and some of your doctors?"* You may get transferred to someone else after your introduction, or the person that answers the phone might be able to help you.
- Ask your questions about the practice.** Look at the end of this checklist to find a list of sample questions.
- Tell the person a little bit about yourself.** Giving the person important but *brief* information about your medical history and what you are looking for in a doctor can be helpful. Here is an example of what you might say. *"I have been to your website and I really like Dr. A, Dr. B, and Dr. C. I am generally healthy but I have back problems sometimes. I really want to find a doctor that has good communication skills and one that is open to alternative medicine. Which one of these doctors do you think might be best for me?"*

If you have a chronic health condition, this is a good time to find out whether any of the doctors at the practice have any special training or expertise. For example: *"I've been to your website and I really like Dr. A, Dr. B, and Dr. C. I have MS – do any of those doctors have any special training or any successes in treating other patients with MS?"*

- Ask whether any of the doctors offer "get to know you" visits.** A "get to know you" or "meet and greet" visit allows a patient to have a short visit with a doctor

to learn more about the doctor. Some doctors do not offer these visits, but if they do, there should not be a charge. In this visit you can ask the doctor general questions about how he or she works with patients, but you cannot discuss any medical issues that you may have.

- Decide whether the practice is right for you.** Was the staff pleasant and helpful? Were they able to give you enough information about the doctors to help you make a choice? Do you feel comfortable that you will receive good care?

Step 4: Choose a Doctor That is Right for You

Now that you have spoken with the 3 practices, you should be able to choose a practice and narrow your list of doctors to 1 or 2. The last step in the process is to make your final choice.

- Schedule a “get to know you” visit.** This can be an important step in deciding whether a doctor is right for you. Remember that the purpose of this visit is to see whether you think the doctor is a “good fit” – not to discuss any medical problems. Look at the end of this checklist to find a list of sample questions that you might ask in a “get to know you” visit.
- Choose your doctor.** With all the information you have found, you can now choose a doctor that is best for you.
- Check with your insurance company.** If you have an HMO or similar plan, you will need to let them know that you have a new doctor. You should also double check that the doctor is covered in your health plan’s network.
- Have your medical records transferred.** Write a letter to your prior doctor’s office and ask for your medical records to be transferred to your new doctor. In the letter, include your name, your date of birth, and the name and address of where you would like your medical records sent.
- Schedule an appointment with your new doctor.** Once your records have been transferred, you should schedule a visit with your new doctor as soon as reasonable. In this visit, your doctor can review your medical history and you can talk about any medical concerns that you have. Sometimes scheduling a physical is the best approach (but make sure your insurance plan will cover this). Make sure you bring a list of any prescription or over-the-counter drugs you are taking.

Sample questions to ask a physician practice when you are selecting a doctor.

- Do you accept my insurance? (You may also be able to find this information at your health plan's website)
- What are the office hours?
- What happens if I get sick or need help when you're not open? (Do they have 24-hour call service?)
- What happens if I need to be seen on a day when my doctor is busy or out of the office? (Do other doctors in the practice cover for each other?)
- Can you tell me the typical process for getting an appointment with a doctor? How long does it usually take to get an appointment?
- If I have a question about my care, who do I call? How soon will someone call me back?
- Where are routine x-rays and laboratory studies performed? Can these be done in-office, or will I have to go to an outside laboratory? How quickly do I get the results?

Examples of things you might want to ask about the doctor(s) that you are thinking about choosing include:

- Is Dr. X accepting new patients?
- How long does it usually take to get an appointment with Dr. X?
- Does Dr. X have any special training or area of specialty?

Sample questions to ask a doctor during a "Get to Know You" visit.

- Do you have the background and training that I might need? (Remember to ask about any issues that might be of special importance to you, such as a chronic health condition that you have.)
- What do you look for in a patient?
- How do you come to an agreement with patients about treatment?
- What hospital do you usually work with?
- Do you respond to calls at night or on the weekend?
- Do you make hospital rounds personally or do you use a hospitalist service?
- Does your office use electronic medical records? If so, does it include: disease registry, electronic prescribing, electronic patient reminders, lab/imaging results, etc.

- How will you help me manage any specialty care I may need? If I need to see a specialist about a particular problem, how do you typically coordinate the information and planning? What would you expect my role to be?
- How do you decide which specialist to recommend? Do you have access to quality information on specialists to guide the selection?
- How much time will I usually have to spend with you during my annual physical? Will there be time to discuss concerns, treatments, health strategies etc.?
- If I have a question about my care, who do I call? How soon will someone call me back? Who would normally call me back?
- How will you use the health risk appraisal I complete at work?
- What can I tell you about myself that can help you determine whether this might be a good fit?