

Choosing the Right Doctor

Consider the following questions and steps as you and your loved one evaluate physicians.

1. Has a consumer group rated doctors in the area where your loved one lives? How reliable are these ratings?
2. Does the doctor accept your loved one's health insurance?
3. In what areas does the doctor specialize? Do these areas match our loved one's needs?
4. Length of time in practice?
5. Where did the doctor receive his or her degrees and training?
6. Which hospitals does the doctor use?
7. What are the office hours (when is the doctor available and when can you speak to office staff)?
8. Does the doctor speak the language you and your loved one are most comfortable speaking?
9. How many other doctors "cover" for the doctor when he or she is not available? Who are they?
10. How long does it usually take to get a routine appointment?
11. What happens if your loved one needs to cancel an appointment? Will you have to pay for it anyway?
12. Does the office send reminders about prevention tests?
13. What do you do if your loved one has an "after hours" emergency?
14. Does the doctor give advice over the phone?
15. Is the doctor aware of relevant community resources?
16. How long or difficult is the trip to the office?

If possible, accompany your loved one on his or her first visit. Did the doctor:

1. Give you and your loved one a chance to ask questions?
2. Really listen to these questions?
3. Answer in terms you understood?

4. Show respect for you and your loved one?
5. Ask you both questions?
6. Make you both feel comfortable?
7. Address the health problem(s) your loved one came with?
8. Ask about treatment preferences?
9. Spend enough time with you?

When evaluating a doctor, trust your own reactions but also give the relationship some time to develop. It will take more than one visit for you, your loved one, and the doctor to get to know each other.

And keep in mind:

1. Give information. Don't wait to be asked.
2. You know important things about your loved one's symptoms and health history. Tell the doctor what you think he or she needs to know.
3. It is important to tell the doctor personal information—even if it makes you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable.
4. Take your loved one's "health history" list with you (and keep it up to date).
5. Make sure the doctor is aware of any medicines your loved one is taking. Talk about any allergies or reactions to medicines.
6. Tell the doctor about any natural or alternative medicines or treatments.
7. Bring other medical information, such as x-ray films, test results, and medical records.
8. Ask questions. If you don't, the doctor may think you understand everything that was said.
9. Write down questions before your visit. List the most important ones first to make sure they get asked and answered.
10. Take notes.