

Questions to Ask When Choosing a Doctor

(excerpt from http://www.patientsafetypartnership.org/Choosing_Doctor.html)

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Is your doctor's age a factor? The years of patient experience accumulated by older physicians can be a significant advantage. Some research suggests that patients tend to prefer the bedside manner of older doctors. A physician with many years of experience may also have better clinical judgment, which could translate into improved ability to diagnose and manage complex health problems. But a study published in a February 2005 issue of the Annals of Internal Medicine reported the seemingly counterintuitive finding that, overall, the more experience a physician has, the worse his or her care becomes. In general, if your priority is someone familiar with current evidenced-based standards of care, you may want to opt for a younger physician. And if you have multiple, complex health problems, or put a premium on bedside manner, you may lean toward an older one.

Male or female? Some research suggests that women prefer getting care from female doctors; that's particularly true for screening tests for breast, cervical, and colon cancer. Other research hints that female physicians may do a better job than male ones in providing basic preventive services to both women and men. So if you're particularly concerned about preventive health care, consider seeing a female doctor—especially if you're a woman yourself.

Are you looking for a collaborative partner or a trusted leader? The caricature of the average primary-care doctor has gradually shifted from the father figure who makes medical decisions for you to a technician who lays out an array of treatment options for you to choose from with hardly a word of guidance. The reality, of course, is that a good doctor has always been someone whose judgment you trust but who is also willing to take your preferences into account and to admit when the medical evidence is uncertain. And most physicians combine both characteristics, at least to some extent. Still, doctors do tend to lean toward either relying mainly on their professional judgment or using a shared decision-making model that involves actively educating patients and seeking their input.

QUESTIONS TO ASK A POTENTIAL DOCTOR

How long will I have to wait for an appointment? Look for practices that offer "open-access" scheduling, in which doctors typically leave part of each day's schedule unbooked so they can offer some same-day appointments.

Do they keep paper or electronic medical records? Computer-based record-keeping is considered a major step toward improving the quality and efficiency of medical care. But only about one-quarter of Canadian and U.S. doctors surveyed recently said they currently use electronic records, compared with 8 out of 10 or more in Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

Do they take questions by e-mail? Though searching for health information is one of the most popular uses of the Internet, less than 10 percent of patients communicate with their doctors by e-mail. That relatively small number may be due, in part, to many doctors' reluctance to hand out their e-mail addresses, for fear both of liability implications and of being overwhelmed by "cyberchondriacs." E-mail "conversation" is great for non-emergency matters: problems or advice about a chronic disease, an appointment, test results, clarification of some item that came up during an office encounter, an overlooked question, a medication side effect, or any question requiring only a yes or no answer. And it's a direct link to your doctor, without a telephone intermediary such as a nurse or assistant and can supplement your time with you.

ASKING AROUND—PEOPLE AND PLACES TO HELP WITH YOUR SEARCH

Once you have a sense of what kind of doctor is best for you, ask people you trust, for example, friends, family, and coworkers, about doctors they use and like. You might ask questions such as:

- ★ Do you know a good doctor?
- ★ Would you recommend your doctor?
- ★ What do you like about your doctor?
- ★ How long does it take to get an appointment?
- ★ Can you usually see your doctor right away if you need to, like on the same day if you get sick?

In addition to talking to friends, family, and coworkers, you can talk with other health professionals you see, for example, your heart doctor or the doctor you see for your lung problems, and ask for recommendations...