

How to find a good doctor

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[NOTE: While this article applies to Texas, the principles will work in almost all communities and states.]

Living in the Greater Houston area provides you with a very large selection of highly qualified physicians, both primary care and specialists.

In a very good way, this is a nice problem to have, but it also can be overwhelming when you are looking for a doctor for you or a member of your family.

One way to start to locate a new physician is with your insurance company. Identify those who are participating physicians in your insurance plan. That should be easily available online.

For routine health care, a location near your home or near your place of work may be an important consideration.

For more serious or life-threatening conditions, you may need to be willing to consider traveling a little.

Ask yourself if there a particular hospital you definitely would or would not want to use. This might be an important consideration as well. All of the local hospitals should have a list of their physician staff members on their web sites.

You can check the Texas State Board of Medical Examiners' web site (www.tmb.state.tx.us/consumers/) to be sure none of the doctors on your initial list has ever had any sanctions, restrictions, or suspensions on his or her medical license.

With your potential physician list in hand, ask friends, neighbors, and coworkers if they have had any personal experience with the doctors you are considering.

Also ask if there are any doctors not on your list that they would recommend. You may learn a lot from these personal experiences to assist you in your search.

If you already have a patient-doctor relationship you like, call that office and ask the staff for a list of doctors they recommend in the speciality you are looking for. If it is a common referral request for that doctor's office, the staff may have a list easily available; but don't be "put off" if you are told that they need to ask the doctor and call you back. It may take a day or two, but they really are trying to give you the best recommendations they can. Cross-reference their suggestions with your insurance plan list and with other names you have been told about.

One of the very best ways to find a new doctor is to find out who other doctors use for themselves and their families. It is always good to ask a doctor you know and trust "is this someone you would use for yourself or your family?"

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At this point, you may have already identified one or two doctors as your top choices. If so, call and make an appointment for an initial visit.

Trust your instincts. You need to feel that your doctor is listening to you and addressing your concerns. Communication and mutual respect are very important in medicine.

If you are not sure you have found the right doctor, keep that one as a possibility and continue asking around. If you have an additional choice, consider also making an appointment “for a second opinion.” (Check your insurance rules to see if that second opinion appointment will be covered or if you will need to pay for the second appointment yourself.)

Although there are some excellent resources on the internet, some websites may look more helpful than they really are. If a web site is full of advertising, it is not likely to be a good reference. This is especially true if it is offering to let you buy an information report about a doctor. These sites are just using doctors’ names to sell advertising for their own financial benefit. Unfortunately, many of these lists pay to have their web sites show up first in your search engines -- because it helps them make more money from more advertising. You may need to go deeper into your search engine results to find what you need.

A good doctor’s web site should include information about professional qualifications, such as Board Certification (important), educational training, professional publications written by that physician, and professional honors and awards. Physician honors and awards which are nominated or selected by fellow physicians carry much greater significance, such as professional peer recognition awards and “top doc” lists in certain publications, including “Texas Monthly.”

There are actually some “honors” or “best of” magazine lists where doctors (and their employees) can stuff the ballot box, so pay attention to how the selection process works.

In this current economic health care crisis, an additional word of advice is in order. Because both Medicare and the insurance industry are setting Texas physician compensation below the actual cost of providing medical care to Texas patients, you may find that some very good physicians are not on your insurance plan. This is probably going to become increasingly true over the next two to three years as doctors make adjustments in their practices just to stay in business.

Non-participating doctors will probably have a standard discounted “pay in full at time of visit” fee schedule. Call and ask, if you think you might be interested in seeing a non-participating physician. Some specialties can be very specific about what an office visit would cost, and other specialties will only be able to give you a price range. That is because until the doctor actually examines you, it can be very difficult for an employee to know in advance exactly what your actual level of service would be.

You usually can charge the office visit to your credit card, and by immediately filing your insurance claim, your insurance reimbursement check will probably be to you about the time you would need to make payment on the credit card.

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