Choosing a Primary Care Provider

There are several reasons why you may be searching for a primary care provider. Perhaps you've recently moved. Maybe you've learned that your current doctor is retiring. Or, you're a young adult and the last doctor you remember seeing may have been your pediatrician from childhood. Finding the right doctor or health care provider is an important part of your medical care. Use this handout as a guide to help you select a primary care provider who meets your needs and provides you with quality care.

What is a Primary Care Provider?

Primary care providers are trained to serve as your main doctor over the long term. Individuals make appointments to see their primary care provider for general health problems and preventive screenings. Primary care providers treat many common medical conditions and will also refer you to specialists (doctors who treat specific parts of the body, conditions, or age groups) if needed.

Types of Primary Care Providers

General practitioners and **family practitioners** treat a variety of medical problems in people of all ages. In addition to caring for children and adults of all ages, their practice may include obstetrics and minor surgery.

Internists are adult doctors who deal with the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of adult diseases.

Obstetricians/gynecologists are doctors who often provide all or some of the primary care needs for women, especially those of childbearing age.

Nurse Practitioners (NP) and Physician Assistants (PA) are trained to provide many aspects of primary care. They have gone through different certification and training than doctors. They are commonly called "physician extenders," consult with physicians and are able to write prescriptions.

Pediatricians serve as primary care doctors for many children including newborns, infants and adolescents.

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Things to Consider

Once you have an idea of what type of doctor is right for you, ask around for recommendations. For example, ask trustworthy coworkers, family, or friends the following:

- Would you recommend your current doctor?
- What do you like about your doctor?
- If you are sick, are you able to get in to see your doctor right away?

It is important to consider your personal need when selecting a primary care provider. The following questions can help you make your decision.

- Do you prefer your doctor's office be close to work or your home?
- Are clinic office hours convenient for you?
- Is the primary care provider accepting new patients?
- Is the office staff helpful and good about returning phone calls?
- Is it easy to contact the provider? Do they use email?
- Who sees patients if your doctor is not available or out of town?
- Can you get x-rays or lab work done in the office or nearby?
- How long is the normal office visit? (You want a doctor who will take time to listen to your concerns, answer your questions, and explain things clearly.)
- Is the primary care provider covered under my health plan?

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- If you are covered under a Group Health Cooperative of Eau Claire health plan, visit us online at group-health.com to view our Provider Directory.
- If you are covered under a Group Health Cooperative of Eau Claire health plan, you can also contact **Group Health Cooperative's Member Services Department at (715) 552-4300 or (888) 203-7770** to assist you in making a primary care selection.

Review your Choice

After your first appointment, think about if you are happy with the choice you made. Patient doctor relationships do take time to develop, but if you are not happy with your choice, you may want to consider finding a new primary care provider. Think about the following:

- Did my doctor give me a chance to ask questions?
- Did my doctor truly listen to my concerns and respond in ways I understood?
- Did my doctor make me feel comfortable and respected?

References:

National Library of Medicine Medline Plus
   Choosing a Primary Care Provider
   http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001939.htm

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
   AgePage Choosing a Doctor
   http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/choosing-doctor