



Highlights: Primary Care Doctors

The most important way to ensure you get high-quality health care is to establish a relationship with a good primary care physician. In addition to ratings of surgeons (based on government data on surgeon performance) and ratings of physician specialists, *Boston Consumers' CHECKBOOK*, available at www.checkbook.org, features ratings of 116 local primary care doctors, along with tips on how to choose a physician, and how to get the best care once you do. Highlights from CHECKBOOK's article include:

- CHECKBOOK asked consumers to rate their experiences with doctors they had recently seen. The ratings include only those doctors who received ratings from at least 10 patients. Many doctors were rated "very good" or "excellent" for "overall quality" by more than 95 percent of their surveyed patients. At the other extreme, there were some doctors who got such favorable ratings from fewer than 75 percent of their surveyed patients.
- Your primary care physician should be a family practitioner, internist, pediatrician (for children), or a geriatrician (for elderly patients).
- Being able to communicate and work well with your doctor is critical to your health. Research has shown that patients who receive care from doctors who listen and communicate well tend to get more accurate diagnoses, respond better to treatment, and recover more quickly. And patients are more likely to participate in their own care, for example, to take their medicine or make lifestyle changes, when their doctors have successfully communicated with them about why such things are important, what is expected of them, and what they can expect to experience.
- Once you have identified potential physicians, answer the following questions about each by consulting resources such as Medicare's Physician Compare website, health insurance provider directories, physician recognition programs, calling the doctor's office, asking patients, or meeting the doctor:
 - Does the doctor work as a personal, or family, doctor on a primary care basis?
 - Is the doctor accepting new patients, specifically patients from your health insurance plan?
 - At what hospitals does the doctor admit patients? (Check www.checkbook.org's ratings of hospitals and preferably choose a doctor who refers to at least one top-rated hospital.)
 - Does the doctor use an electronic health record system? There is evidence that the use of these systems represents some of the greatest improvements in medical care.
 - Is the doctor "board certified" in his or her specialty? This means the doctor has taken at least two to six years of post-medical school training and has passed a difficult exam.
 - Where did the doctor take his or her residency? Those hospitals tied to recognizable universities usually provide good instruction.
 - From what medical school did the doctor graduate? Give special consideration to doctors trained in the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Belgium. But keep in mind most experts think location of residency is more relevant than medical school.
 - What are the doctor's hours? Many see patients on evenings or weekends to accommodate patients' work schedules. Also, does the doctor share "on call" duties for after-hours needs?
 - Does the doctor give advice via phone or email?
 - Will the doctor's office deal with your insurance carrier?
 - What are the charges for routine visits, follow-up visits, etc.? These answers will give you a sense as to overall charges and how the charges relate to your health plan's payment rules.

- What diagnostic tests does the doctor perform in-house? While it's convenient to have tests done in one place, be aware that doctors who provide these services have a financial incentive for providing them, possibly leading to unnecessary tests.
- Once you have the names of a few doctors to consider, you may want to schedule an informational visit or a physical with the doctor who seems most appealing. If you don't feel it is immediately necessary to see the doctor, keep your notes handy and call your top choice when a medical situation arises.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated physicians, as shown in Boston Consumers' CHECKBOOK, and CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.

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