

CHOOSING A SPECIALIST

Specialists are doctors with expertise and training in specific areas of the body. For instance, cardiologists see patients with heart or vascular problems. Allergists see patients with allergies. Oncologists treat people with cancer. Here are some tips to help you choose a specialist.

Start Here

- Know anyone in the medical field? If so, start by asking them if they have recommendations. If you don't know any medical professionals, chances are you have family or friends who do. Ask around!
- Ask your primary care provider to give you a referral. If you know any medical professionals, ask their opinion. If they can't help you, they likely know someone who can. Also check with friends and family and do your own research on the internet.
- Look for doctors who are affiliated with respected medical schools and major medical centers. If you have a serious illness (such as cancer) or a rare condition, consider doctors affiliated with a 'center of excellence.' This is a hospital or medical center recognized as providing the most expert and highest level of care for certain conditions.
- Look for doctors who are in-network with your insurance. In some cases (such as rare diseases), there may only be a few specialists available who treat your condition-and they may not participate in your insurance. Find out how much you'll be expected to pay out-of-pocket. Often, you can negotiate reduced payments if you pay in cash. And some insurance plans may pay a portion of the costs of out-of-network providers.
- If you don't live near a major medical center, or the specialist you need is too far away, you still have options. You can even get opinions from specialists online (see 'Get a Second Opinion' in this document).

Check Background and Credentials

- To check physicians' licenses, certifications, education & disciplinary actions go to www.docinfo.org.
- To verify physicians' board certifications go to www.abms.org.

Getting an Appointment

Sometimes it can be tricky to get an appointment with a specialist. If you're having trouble, call your primary care provider (or one of your other providers) and ask if he or she can help. If you know people in the medical field, ask if they may be able to make the connection for you.

If there are no appointments available, ask the practice receptionist to put you on the cancellation list. Call the office every few days to follow-up. And remember to always be friendly and polite, you may get 'squeezed in' a lot faster.

Referrals

Before you visit a specialist, call your insurance company to see if you need a referral. Some plans require them and some don't.

You'll also want to find out if the specialist requires a referral from another medical provider before you can be seen.

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Be Prepared

- Your doctor only has a limited amount of time to spend with you. Being organized and ready means you'll get the most out of your visit.
- Have relevant medical records, tests, Xrays, scans, etc. sent to your specialist *before* your appointment if you can.
- Bring your health summary, medication list, and a list of questions or concerns to discuss with your doctor.
- Bring a detailed description of your symptoms.
- Bring your referral letter (if needed) and insurance cards.

Get a Second Opinion

If you have a serious disease, rare condition or an undiagnosed illness, you should **always** get a second opinion. Especially if a doctor has recommended surgery or major treatments.

A **study conducted by the Mayo Clinic** found that around 88 percent of patients who seek a second opinion will get a modified diagnosis. And 21 percent of patients will leave with an entirely new diagnosis. These findings highlight the value, and necessity, of second opinions!

If the first two opinions you get are very different, or you just don't feel right about the diagnosis or treatment plan, consider getting more opinions until you feel comfortable.

Some major medical centers, such as Cleveland Clinic and Johns Hopkins, even offer online second opinions.

Be Nice & Don't Settle

- A confident, compassionate provider will appreciate you taking an active role in your own healthcare. If the specialist seems irritated by questions, makes you feel rushed, or dismisses your concerns, then consider finding another provider. There are lots of competent, caring medical professionals out there. Unless this specialist is your only option, you don't have to settle for someone who is rude, condescending or dismissive.
- Get to know the practice staff who are helping take care of you (learn as many names as you can!). This includes the receptionists, the nurses and the medical assistants. Be sure to let them, and your doctor, know they are appreciated.

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