

Choosing Your Child's Health Care Provider

Choosing the right health care provider for your child is more important than you might think: The average new parent and baby visit the health care provider's office 11 times in the first year for six routine well-baby visits and five other visits. Choose well, and the provider you pick might treat your child all the way from first cold to pre-college physical.

How should I begin my search for a health care provider?

Some parents know which health care provider or practice they want for their baby before they even become pregnant, but most start the search during pregnancy and arrive at a decision when they're seven or eight months along. Making a decision well before labor and delivery allows for an informed — not hasty — choice. If you're unfamiliar with local health care providers, you may feel overwhelmed by the task of finding the perfect health care provider for your new baby. Relax. With a little homework and legwork, you'll find one you trust and respect.

Some parents take their child to a pediatrician, a doctor who specializes in children. Others prefer a family practitioner, a health care provider who specializes in family medicine and can treat your whole family, from birth to old age. In addition, Pediatric Nurse Practitioners and Family Practice Nurse Practitioners can care for your child. Nurse Practitioners are advanced practice nurses who provide high quality health care similar to that of a doctor. Besides clinical care, NPs focus on health promotion, disease prevention, health education, and counseling. Either one is fine, as long as you feel comfortable and confident about your child's care.

About three months before you're due, start compiling a list of candidates. You can ask your midwife or obstetrician for recommendations, of course. Even better, get names of health care providers from the real experts — friends, relatives, neighbors, and co-workers with kids who share your parenting and life philosophies.

Questions to ask your trusted sources

Rather than just gathering names from people, try asking a few probing questions such as these:

- How does your child respond to the health care provider?
- Does the health care provider really seem to enjoy working with children?
- Does the health care provider seem to know about the latest medical advances?
- Does the health care provider welcome questions?
- Does the health care provider take time to discuss problems and listen to parents' concerns?
- If it's a group practice, do you know and like the other health care providers?
- Is the office staff patient and helpful?
- How long do you usually have to wait?
- Is the waiting room pleasant and kid-friendly?
- Is parking plentiful and close by?
- Is there anything you don't like or wish was different about your child's health care provider or her practice?

The answers you get can help you narrow your list to the handful of health care providers you'd actually like to interview.

Now that I've got some recommendations, what should I do?

No doubt, a few glowing recommendations from your friends and colleagues have stood out. Before going a step further, though, make sure all the health care providers you're hoping to consider will accept your health insurance. Next, look over your list and note which health care providers have convenient locations and office hours. The best health care provider in the city can lose her luster if her office is inconveniently located (imagine driving through traffic with a sick and miserable child). And though it might seem unnecessary, it's wise to check with your state medical board to find out whether any health care provider you're interested in has been disciplined for wrongdoing.

The next step is visiting your top prospects at their offices. Only a face-to-face meeting (preferably with both parents present) will show you whether this health care provider has the warmth and sensitivity you're seeking. Ideally, you'll start this process about two months before you're due. Most offices will accommodate your request for an interview with the health care provider, though some practices charge for it.

What to ask a potential health care provider

It takes time to visit and interview health care providers, so be sure to go armed with questions about the things that are most important to you. Here are some possibilities:

- Does the health care provider (or someone in the practice) see newborns in the hospital, or will the first contact be an office visit?
- Do the health care provider's hours suit your schedule? You might prefer one who works certain days of the week, or offers evening or Saturday morning hours.
- How does the office handle phone inquiries? Does it set aside specific times for parents to call in with questions or is there an open advice line during office hours? And if staff members handle the inquiries, do they dispense their own advice or relay the health care provider's?
- Does the health care provider accept and answer questions by e-mail?
- How are appointments handled for children who are sick? Is there good chance your child will get to see his own health care provider?
- How do you reach the health care provider if your child gets sick after hours? When your health care provider is not on call, who covers? (Practices vary: Some send patients to urgent care clinics, for example, while others will meet you at the office even at night.)
- How does the practice handle payments, billing, laboratory charges, and insurance claims?
- Do you and the health care provider have similar views about topics such as circumcision, breastfeeding, immunizations, alternative medicine, parenting methods (such as attachment parenting), co-sleeping, single parents, and working mothers? If not, is she open to — and supportive of — other opinions and approaches?
- Pay attention to such intangibles as the health care provider's style. Do you want a health care provider who offers choices and lets you decide which one works best for you? Or would you be more comfortable with one who gives a lot of direction?
- Make note of the overall atmosphere of the office and the ease of parking.