

What is a Primary Care Physician? Why do I need one?

What is a PCP?

A primary care physician (PCP) is your family doctor and a partner who is focused on keeping you healthy. Your PCP should be who you see when you're not feeling well, but also who you see for regular visits like your annual wellness exam.

Why do you need a PCP?

A PCP is always there for you, and everyone should have a provider who can step back and look at the "big picture" of their health – especially during times when a diagnosis is needed. This is what primary care physicians are trained to do.

What are the benefits of a PCP?

Your PCP:

- **Knows you**
 - Having an established relationship with your PCP allows him or her to be familiar with you and your family's medical history. This makes it easier for them to find patterns in your health and know how your body responds to certain illnesses.
- **Helps you navigate the healthcare system**
 - They can refer you to specialists who may be more knowledgeable about a specific health issue.
 - Medical care can get complicated, particularly as you age and if you have one or more chronic medical conditions. Your primary care doctor keeps track of your health, including treatments and medications, makes sure you see the right doctors at the right times and communicates with them about what's going on with your health, and serves as the point person to make sure that your medical treatments and medications won't interact dangerously with one another.
- **Lowers your out-of-pocket costs**
 - By improving health, a PCP can help you avoid duplicate tests and prescriptions, costly visits to the emergency room, or inpatient hospital stays
 - Your PCP can also answer questions about any medications or medical devices you may use and can help find alternatives to better fit your budget.
 - In his/her role as coordinator of your care, your primary care doctor keeps all doctors informed of your health status and treatments so you don't undergo unnecessary tests or procedures or have treatments you don't want or don't need.
- **Helps you reach your goals**
 - Planning to lose weight, eat better, or live a healthier lifestyle in general? Your PCP can work with you to plan out how you can achieve your goals. Your doctor can recommend diets, exercise plans, and more to help you on your wellness journey.

- **Increases your quality of care**

- In addition to providing care for acute illnesses and chronic conditions, your doctor can help you take measures to prevent their onset. Your PCP keeps track of your health over time, performs preventive services and screenings to catch diseases early, and offers advice to help you maintain a healthy and happy life.
- PCP can access test results run by specialists so she or he can have a big-picture view of your health and can often determine the cause of an illness
- PCP also keeps track of your screenings and reminds you to schedule them. Should you need to see a specialist, your PCP can recommend one who is in-network and help with any follow-up.

Did you know having a PCP keeps you healthier as you age?

Studies in numerous medical journals have confirmed this, including one in International Journal of Health Services which revealed that states with more primary care physicians per capita have better health outcomes, including fewer deaths from cancer, heart disease, or stroke. A separate study in the same journal suggests that an ample supply of primary care physicians is associated with a longer life span—if you add more primary care physicians to a community, the result is fewer premature deaths.

Why can't I just go to any specialist?

Your PCP can look at your overall health and help pick a specialist that's right for you! Knowing what specialists you are going to means the PCP can help coordinate your care and help you save money.

Here are some examples:

- **You can't always be 100 percent sure where the problem is.**
Your PCP can help you figure out which specialist you need to see, or they may be able to handle your concerns without an extra visit.
- **You could end up dealing with a lot of specialists.**
If you end up seeing more than one specialist, chances are some of their advice will conflict. Your PCP can help you sort through the different things you've been told and help you figure out what's most important.
- **You could end up spending more money.**
If you're hopping between urgent care facilities or specialists, there's a good chance you'll wind up having more tests and procedures ordered (and spending more money) than if you had kept seeing the same doctor all along. When you stick with one doctor (and have any other providers send information back to them), it should be easier to avoid unnecessary – or even conflicting – tests and services.