

## Choosing a Pediatrician

When it comes to medical care for kids, there are three types of qualified providers: pediatricians, family physicians and pediatric nurse practitioners.

Pediatrics is the medical specialty focused on the physical, emotional and social health of children from birth through adolescence. A pediatrician will not only diagnose and treat diseases, but also try to prevent them in the first place.

Because they train in many areas, family physicians are qualified to care for patients of all ages. This means your child could see the same doctor from birth through adulthood. It also means that all members of your family can receive their primary care from the same doctor. A family physician will know the medical history of all family members and may also be more aware of the emotional and social issues within your family. When seeking a family physician, be sure to ask about age policies — some see only a few kids or don't see children younger than a certain age.

A pediatric nurse practitioner (PNP) often works in conjunction with a medical doctor's office and has earned a master's degree in nursing and can take medical histories, perform physical examinations on children, make medical diagnoses, write prescriptions and provide counseling and treatment. Nurse practitioners are also referred to as advanced practice nurses, or APNs. Some parents might hesitate to choose a PNP, possibly worrying that the PNP is less extensively trained in children's health care. These feelings are largely unwarranted. A PNP might be able to see your child sooner, and can provide high-quality care. For complex medical problems, PNPs are trained to consult the doctor.

### Beginning your search

If you're in a managed health care insurance plan, your choice of participating doctors who provide primary care for children may be limited, so be sure to check the plan's website.

If you have questions about whether a provider participates in your plan or if you're interested in a doctor who isn't on the list, call the health plan directly. Also call if your child has any special medical needs that would require an out-of-network doctor.

Once you know the limits of your health plan, compile a list of candidates from people you trust — your relatives, friends, neighbors, and coworkers who share your parenting philosophies.

If you've recently moved to a new area, consider contacting area hospitals or medical schools for recommendations. Another option is a physician referral line, such as Ask Children's (330-543-2000 in the greater Akron area or 1-800-358-KIDS in Ohio).

You also can request a list of board-certified pediatricians from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and board-certified family physicians from the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP).

### Interviewing doctors

You'll want to be sure that you're comfortable with the doctor's personality, office staff, location and environment. A prenatal appointment is an excellent opportunity for parents to ask questions and get acquainted with the office staff.

During the interview, you should find out how the practice works by addressing these topics:

- What are the office hours? You may prefer a doctor who offers weekend and evening hours.
- Is this a solo or group practice? If it's a solo practice and your doctor is not available on weekends or evenings, what are the coverage arrangements?
- Does a PNP work in the office? How does he or she fit into the practice arrangement?
- Which hospital is your doctor affiliated with? Will your doctor come to the hospital when you deliver to examine the baby? If your baby needs to be hospitalized, who will provide care during the hospitalization?
- How does the office handle phone inquiries during and after hours?
- Is email an option for communicating with your doctor? Does the practice use an electronic medical record, which may make it easier to transfer your child's health information, fill out forms, schedule appointments and view test results?
- Are lab tests done in the office?
- What are the payment policies? This is especially important if you do not have prepaid health coverage. What are the fees for services? Must they be paid in full at the time of the visit or can payment plans be arranged?
- What are the policies regarding referrals to specialists if your child needs additional care?

# Choosing a Pediatrician (continued)

## Things to consider

The interview is a great time to observe office procedures. Check out the reception area: how many patients are waiting? More than a handful may mean overbooking or it could mean the doctor is spending extra time with a patient who needs it. Is there a place where sick kids can be separated from those in for a well visit? Is the area clean and child-friendly? Is the staff polite and considerate to patients in the waiting room and to people on the phone?

Another important aspect of the interview is getting a feel for the doctor's personality. Does he see parents as partners in a child's care? Is he patient and willing to explain things carefully? Do you get the impression the doctor would be supportive if you requested a second opinion? Are the doctor's age and gender important issues to you? You also should be sure that your parenting style matches your doctor's on issues like circumcision, breastfeeding and immunizations.