Choosing a Provider for Your Baby

Planning for a baby can be one of the most exciting times of your life, but also one of the most demanding times. Pondering names, redesigning spaces in your home, and getting all of the equipment an infant needs are just a few of the things that will consume many hours during pregnancy. Choosing the right healthcare provider should be included on your list of things to do before your baby is born.

The following are some tips to help you get started:

- Your search for a healthcare provider should begin at least 3 months in advance of the due date of your baby. Babies often come early and you will want to find a health professional whose style and personality will complement your own.
- If you’re in a managed healthcare plan, your choice of participating providers who provide primary care for children may be limited, so be sure to check the plan’s online list.
- Once you know the limits imposed by your health plan, compile a list of candidates from people you trust – your relatives, friends, neighbors, and co-workers who share your parenting philosophies. Your OB provider can also be very helpful.
- Another source for recommendations is My Nurse, the Iowa Health – Des Moines 24-hour health information and referral line - 1-800-IA-HEALTH (1-800-424-3258).

Considering that this provider will be the first to treat your baby, you will want to be sure you feel comfortable with the provider's personality, office staff, location and environment. A prenatal appointment is an excellent opportunity for both parents to ask questions, get acquainted with the office staff and address the following topics:

- What are the office hours? You may prefer a provider who offers weekend and evening hours.
- Is this a solo or group practice? If it’s a solo practice and your provider is not available on weekends or evenings, what are his or her coverage arrangements? If it’s a group practice, ask about the qualifications of the other providers in the office. Who will see your child if your provider is on vacation or otherwise unavailable?
- Which hospitals is your provider affiliated with? Will your provider come to the hospital when you deliver to examine the baby once he or she is born? If your baby needs to be hospitalized, who will care for him there?
- How does the office handle phone inquiries during and after hours? Are special times set aside for parents to call in with questions or is there an open advice line during working hours? How are after-hours calls handled? How quickly can you expect a call back from the provider on call after you have contacted the answering service? Are after-hours calls routed to a “nurse-on-call” system?
- Is email an option for communicating with your provider?
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- Will your child’s provider handle emergencies, or will your child be referred to an emergency room or urgent care center?
- Are lab tests done in the office?
- What are the payment policies? 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 Is the Provider’s Personality?

Another important aspect of the interview is getting a feel for the provider’s personality. Does he or she see parents as partners in a child’s care? Is he or she patient and willing to explain things carefully? Do you get the impression that he or she would be supportive if you requested a second opinion? Are the provider’s age and gender important issues to you?

Good communication between a provider and parent is essential to building a good working relationship. Is the provider a good listener who seems responsive to your concerns? Are you comfortable asking questions or do you feel intimidated?

You also should be sure that your parenting style matches your provider’s in the important issues. How does the provider feel about circumcision? Breastfeeding? Alternative or integrative medicines or techniques? Use of antibiotics and other medications? Does the provider focus on preventive care, including immunizations, child safety, and nutrition?

Family Physicians and Pediatricians

Pediatricians

Pediatrics is the medical specialty fully focused on the physical, emotional, and social health of children from birth through adolescence. The primary focus of pediatrics is on preventive healthcare.

Pediatricians complete 4 years of medical school, followed by 3 years of pediatric residency. To become board certified, a pediatrician must pass a written examination given by the American Board of Pediatrics. Pediatricians must recertify by taking examinations every 7 years. A pediatrician must also take a certain number of continuing medical education courses each year to be eligible for license renewal in the state where he or she practices.

Family Physicians

Like pediatricians, family physicians complete 4 years of medical school followed by 3 years of family practice residency. Family medicine residents train in pediatrics and several other areas such as internal medicine, orthopedics, and obstetrics and gynecology. They usually spend several months training in each area. Afterwards, they are eligible to take the certifying examination of the American Board of Family Medicine. They are also required to earn continuing medical education credits and take periodic recertification examinations.

Because they train in many areas, family physicians are qualified to care for patients of all ages. This means your child would be able to see the same provider from birth through adulthood and that all members of your family can receive their primary care from him or her.