

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Deborah E. Powell Center for Women's Health

A Nationally Designated Center of Excellence

Choosing a Health Care Provider

Choosing a health care provider can be a difficult decision for you and your family. You may need a different health care provider depending what types of providers are available in your area and what your specific health care needs are. Be sure to consult your insurance plan to ensure that the health care provider you select is covered by your insurance.

There are several types of health care providers.

Primary care physicians (M.D.) There are several types of primary care physicians including family practice physicians, internists, obstetricians, gynecologists, and pediatricians.

Family Practice Physicians are educated to provide care over the lifespan for the whole family and approach care from a family-oriented perspective. They address needs and concerns relating to all the body systems. This means that they can provide ongoing care for mothers, babies, and other family members.

A "board-certified" family physician has: received an MD or DO degree from an accredited school, completed three years of training and practice in an accredited family practice residency program, and passed an examination given by the American Board of Family Practice. All 50 states license family physicians.

Internists or Internal Medicine Physicians

Doctors of internal medicine ("internists") focus on adult medicine. Simply put, doctors of internal medicine are Doctors for Adults. They care for their patients for life — from teen years through old age. Internists have special training that focuses on the prevention and treatment of adult diseases. At least three of their seven or more years of medical school and postgraduate training are dedicated to learning how to prevent, diagnose, and treat diseases that affect adults. Internists are sometimes referred to as the "doctor's doctor," because they are often called upon to act as consultants to other physicians.

They are specially trained to solve puzzling diagnostic problems and can handle severe chronic illnesses and situations where several different illnesses may strike at the same time. They also bring to patients an understanding of wellness (disease prevention and the promotion of health), women's health, substance abuse, mental health, as well as effective treatment of common problems of the eyes, ears, skin, nervous system and reproductive organs. Be careful not to confuse them with "interns" who are doctors in their first year or residency.

Obstetricians/Gynecologists are doctors who have special training in prenatal care, labor, birth, high-risk pregnancy, and surgery. Many obstetricians also provide gynecological care and other health services to women. Many women consider their OB/Gyn to be their primary care physician. Obstetricians are well-suited to care for women with established serious medical conditions.

Providers who are "board-certified" in obstetrics and gynecology have received an MD or DO degree (see below) from an accredited school, completed at least four years of training and practice in an accredited obstetrics and gynecology residency program, and passed an examination given by the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology. All 50 states license obstetricians.

Certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) are educated in the two disciplines of nursing and midwifery. They are registered nurses who have graduated from a nurse-midwifery education program accredited by the American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM). They are "certified" when they pass an exam of the ACNM Certification Council, and are licensed by their state to practice nurse-midwifery. All 50 states license CNMs, and most midwives who practice in the U.S. are CNMs.

CNMs are trained to provide prenatal care, care during labor and birth, and follow-up care to the mother and newborn after the birth. CNMs may also provide "well-woman" care, such as gynecological checkups, pelvic and breast exams, and pap smears, as well as family planning care.

CNMs may work within a midwifery-owned and led practice, in a practice with physicians, or as employees of hospitals, health plans, or public agencies. In all cases, they are required to have established relationships with physicians for consultation, collaboration, and referral, as needed.

Certified Nurse Practitioners (CNP) are also registered nurses with advanced education in women's health. They have also passed the certification examination of the American National Credentialing Center (ANCC). They often work collaboratively with physicians during a pregnancy and you may see a certified nurse practitioner frequently during your visits. CNPs do not deliver babies. They also perform well-women care such as annual exams and family planning. Nurse Practitioners also specialize in adult health, pediatrics, neonates, and geriatrics.

Doctor of Osteopathy (D.O.)—Osteopathic medicine is one of the two health fields nationally recognized as complete schools of medicine. Osteopathic Physicians, also known as Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine or Doctors of Osteopathy (D.O.) diagnose and treat all illnesses and injuries and emphasize preventive care, with special emphasis on the need for the body's systems to be in correct relationship with one another and the importance of the neuro-musculoskeletal system.

Treatments commonly include manipulative therapy, medication, and all other therapies when needed. Osteopathic physicians can be licensed in all 50 states for the full practice of medicine.

In addition to primary care-focused doctors of osteopathy, some D.O.'s are specialized in an area of medicine (as are some Medical Doctors) and may become Board Certified by completing a 3 to 4 year residency within the specialty area, such as orthopedic surgery, neurosurgery, psychiatry, or anesthesiology.

Chiropractic (D.C.)—Chiropractors diagnose and treat back and neck pain and are considered by definition primary care physicians as they are often the first doctor a patient will visit when experiencing back pain. Chiropractors diagnose and treat patients whose health problems are associated with the body's muscular, nervous, and skeletal systems, especially the spine.

The chiropractic profession holds that spinal or vertebral problems affect many important body functions by affecting the nervous system, and that skeletal imbalance through joint or articular dysfunction - especially in the spine - can cause pain and/or dysfunction.

When the source of pain involves musculoskeletal structures, chiropractors manually manipulate or adjust the spinal column. Many chiropractors also use water, light, massage, ultrasound, electric, and heat therapy and may apply supports such as straps, taping and braces. They may also counsel patients about wellness concepts such as nutrition, exercise, lifestyle changes, and stress management, but do not prescribe drugs or perform surgery. When appropriate, chiropractors consult with and refer patients to other health practitioners. Some chiropractors specialize in orthopedics, sports injuries, neurology, nutrition, internal disorders, and/or diagnostic imaging.

Physician assistants (PAs) have special medical education to help physicians provide routine care in several areas including pregnancy. They practice in clinics and hospitals. PAs practice under the supervision of a physician.

Homeopaths treat diseases with a substance that is able to provoke similar signs/symptoms in a healthy body. The body's reaction to these medicines is what brings about the curative process. Homeopaths have _____ education.

Physical Therapists are independent practitioners with an advanced degree. They use heat, exercise, electricity and massage to improve or restore movement and function to the body. Your health care provider may refer you to a physical therapist

Nutritionists or Dieticians provide counseling services to individuals who need professional dietary assessment and guidance to properly manage an illness or disability. They are employed in a variety of settings including hospitals, extended care facilities, clinics, public health centers, and educational institutions. Examples of when you may be referred to a dietician or nutritionist

include but are not limited to are diabetes, obesity, underweight, malnutrition or other metabolic or eating problems.

Need Specific Information About Pregnancy Care?

Some women prefer health care providers that are specially trained prenatal care and childbirth to care for them during pregnancy. Typically women will see an OB/GYN, certified nurse-midwife or a family practice physician. A physician may be an obstetrician/gynecologist (OB/Gyn) who specializes in pregnancy and childbirth or a family practice physician, who can provide health care for all members of the family. Both of these physicians perform ongoing well-woman care. The following information is specific to pregnancy care and the care of your newborn baby.

Family Practice Physicians are educated to provide care over the lifespan for the whole family and approach care from a family-oriented perspective. They address needs and concerns relating to all bodily systems. This means that they can provide ongoing care for mothers, babies, and other family members.

Roughly 25 percent of family practice physicians provide maternity care and attend births. They may work together with an obstetrician or refer to an obstetrician if a complication arises. Quite a few FPs are trained in surgery and perform cesarean sections. A "board-certified" family physician has received an MD or DO degree from an accredited school, completed three years of training and practice in an accredited family practice residency program, and passed an examination given by the American Board of Family Practice. All 50 states license family physicians.

Studies comparing practice styles of family physicians to other maternity caregivers have generally found that women using FPs are more likely than midwives and less likely than obstetricians to have common maternity interventions, such as cesarean section, episiotomy, and labor induction. FPs may combine both an obstetric style of maternity practice and a view of childbirth as an important family event and normal life process. Within family medicine, general family care leads seamlessly to maternity care. And maternity care leads directly into women's postpartum health care, and newborn and baby care.

Obstetricians are doctors who have special training in prenatal care, labor, birth, high-risk pregnancy, and surgery. Obstetricians are well-suited to care for women with established serious medical problems or who are at high risk for developing such problems. Many obstetricians approach birth as a medical event best managed by highly trained specialists. Obstetricians tend to have higher rates of interventions (such as cesareans and episiotomy) than family physicians and midwives, even when the health status and risk level of women is similar.

Providers who are "board-certified" in obstetrics and gynecology have received an MD or DO degree (see below) from an accredited school, completed at least

four years of training and practice in an accredited obstetrics and gynecology residency program, and passed an examination given by the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology. All 50 states license obstetricians

Certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) are educated in the two disciplines of nursing and midwifery. They are registered nurses who have graduated from a nurse-midwifery education program accredited by the American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM). They are "certified" when they pass an exam of the ACNM Certification Council, and are licensed by their state to practice nurse-midwifery. All 50 states license CNMs, and most midwives who practice in the U.S. are CNMs.

CNMs are trained to provide prenatal care, care during labor and birth, and follow-up care to the mother and newborn after the birth. Most CNMs attends births in hospitals, but some may also attend births in out-of-hospital birth centers and in women's homes. CNMs may also provide "well-woman" care, such as gynecological checkups, pelvic and breast exams, and pap smears, as well as family planning care.

CNMs may work within a midwifery-owned and led practice, in a practice with physicians, or as employees of hospitals, health plans, or public agencies. In all cases, they are required to have established relationships with physicians for consultation, collaboration, and referral, as needed.

Certified Nurse-Midwives are well-suited to care for women expecting to have a normal and health pregnancy and childbirth. . They provide prenatal care, care during labor and birth, and care after the birth. Many give priority to providing good information to women, involving women in decision-making, and providing flexible and responsive care. Women under the care of midwives typically are less likely to have a cesarean, an episiotomy, and other interventions than women receiving care from physicians. Some midwives provide continuous support throughout labor and birth, which has many benefits for women, infants, and families and no known risks. Midwives often encourage, are well-informed about, and provide much support for breastfeeding.

Some midwives also have additional training and credentials for childbirth education, breastfeeding consultation, and/or doula care.

At this time, midwives attend about eight percent of births in the U.S. — over 300,000 every year. The trend shows a steady increase in use of midwifery services over time (in 1975, midwives attended about one percent of U.S. births). In contrast to the U.S., midwives are the most common maternity caregiver in many countries in Europe and elsewhere.

Certified professional midwives (CPMs) have passed the certification examination of the North American Registry of midwives (NARM). Candidates for this exam are educated in core content areas, complete a core set of clinical experiences, demonstrate core skills, and present practice plans (including care

guidelines and an emergency care plan). The NARM certification process recognizes multiple routes of entry into midwifery, and most CPMs become midwives without first becoming a nurse. Many states in the U.S. license CPMs or legally recognize them in other ways.

The CPM credential requires knowledge of and experience in out-of-hospital settings, and most CPMs attend births in women's homes or in out-of-hospital birth centers. They usually do not practice in hospitals. CPMs provide prenatal care, care during labor and birth, and care of the new mother and her baby in the early weeks after birth.

Other midwives offering home birth services do not have any of the above credentials. State regulatory mechanisms for such midwives vary widely, from recognition to prohibition of their practice. Although they may have considerable education and experience, established arrangements for consulting with and referring to physicians, and other important qualifications for midwifery practice, women who are considering using their services must carefully explore these questions with the midwife.

Certified Nurse Practitioners (CNP) are also registered nurses with advanced education in women's health. They have also passed the certification examination of the American National Credentialing Center (ANCC). They often work collaboratively with physicians during a pregnancy and you may see a certified nurse practitioner frequently during your visits. CNPs do not deliver babies. They also perform well-women care such as annual exams and family planning.

Doulas birth doula is a trained labor support person who provides emotional and physical support to a laboring woman and her partner. While she is not a medical professional, she can offer a wide range of comfort measures during labor - from massage to aromatherapy to continuous reassurance and coping techniques.

Research has shown that women supported by a doula during labor have a lower cesarean rate, shorter labors, fewer epidural and analgesia requests, and fewer forceps deliveries. More women from various ethnic backgrounds are being trained as doulas.

Pediatricians

Simply put, pediatricians are physicians for children. Children have different health care needs than adults - both medical and emotional. In choosing a pediatrician, you can know that your child is being treated by an expert in children's health. Pediatricians are trained to prevent and manage health problems in infants, children, teens, and young adults.

To become a pediatrician, a physician must take special courses for 3 or more years after medical school and then takes an exam given by the American Board of Pediatrics. After passing the test, the doctor is a board-certified pediatrician. This education prepares your pediatrician to manage your child's total health care

needs, including growth and development, illnesses, nutrition, immunizations, injuries, and physical fitness. Your pediatrician will also work with you on parenting issues such as behavior, emotional or family problems, learning and other school problems, preventing and dealing with drug abuse, puberty and other teen issues

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