

Choosing Your Primary Care Physician

A complete guide to finding
your long-term partner in health



Andrés Sánchez, MD
Board-Certified Internal Medicine Physician
Rea Farms, Charlotte

In this Guide

3 Introduction

Checklist: How to choose a primary care physician

4 What doctors provide primary care?

What's the difference between primary care and specialty care?

5 Why do I need a primary care doctor?

What are the benefits to your overall long-term health?

7 What matters to me? Considerations when choosing a PCP

Checklist: Questions to ask before your appointment

9 Preparing for your appointment

Checklist: How to prepare for your first visit with your new primary doctor

10 After your first visit

Rate your visit with your new primary doctor

About Avance Care

Avance Care provides exceptional primary care services with over 30 locations in Raleigh and Charlotte. Our team of board-certified medical providers specializes in caring for children, teens, and adults by offering a wide range of services.



Introduction

From preventive care to managing chronic diseases, primary care physicians (PCPs) are essential members of a healthcare team. They are often the first point of contact for questions about your health, and who you turn to when health issues arise throughout your life. Primary care physicians are also experts in helping you to stay feeling well.

By seeing your primary care physician every year for your annual wellness visit, they can help make sure you're on the right track, or catch any issues early on, when they are potentially reversible. Primary care physicians are trusted sources of health information and education, and caring, compassionate advocates for your health, and the health of your entire family.



Amanda Steventon, MD
Medical Director Avance Care

Checklist: How to choose a primary care physician

- Read this guide.
- Create your list of potential primary care physicians.
 - Ask friends, family or a co-worker for recommendations.
 - Check your insurance plan website to find in-network providers.
 - Look for highly recommended doctors on Nextdoor or similar social media.
 - Google patient reviews.
 - Look at the doctors' web pages for education, special interests, maybe videos.
- Use the "Checklist: Questions to ask before your appointment" to make a list of the aspects important to you.
- Compare your list of doctors to your list of "wants.". Make your final selection and call for an appointment.
- Use the "Checklist: How to prepare for your first visit".
- After your visit, rate your experience using the "After your first visit" rating sheet.



What doctors provide primary care?

Primary care physicians can be either MDs or DOs. There are different types of PCP doctors.

Family practice physicians treat patients of all ages, from infants to seniors. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, family practice physicians are qualified to treat most ailments and provide comprehensive healthcare. They seek to sustain “an enduring and trusting relationship” with their patients, consider the impact of health on a patient’s family, and help patients navigate the complexities of the healthcare system.

Internal medicine physicians, also called internists, treats adults only. They are experts in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease, offer care for a wide variety of health conditions, and counsel their patients on managing diseases and overall wellness.

Pediatricians have extra training in treating children, including infants and adolescents. They have training in children’s growth and development, and the physical, behavioral and mental health of children and teens. Pediatricians provide preventive care, as well as diagnosing and treating acute and chronic diseases.

Gynecologists focus on women’s health issues, including sexual health, reproductive health, cervical and breast cancer screenings, and urinary tract problems. Many gynecologists also have certifications in obstetrics, which focuses on pregnancy and childbirth. These experts are called ob-gyns.

Geriatricians have additional training in caring for older adults ages 65 and up. These physicians are specialists in age-related issues. They have expertise in treating seniors who may have multiple conditions, are taking multiple medications or have diseases associated with aging, such as cognitive decline or dementia, incontinence or osteoporosis.

Additional providers: Primary care teams also include Nurse Practitioners and Physician Assistants. Both are highly trained, and often board-certified medical professionals who can diagnose and treat patients with a wide range of conditions, develop treatment plans and prescribe medications.

What's the difference between primary care and specialty care?

Primary care: Primary care is your first point of contact with the healthcare system – your “home base.” PCP doctors aren’t limited to a specific organ or system. Rather, primary care doctors look at all aspects of your health.

Specialty care: Specialty care focuses on a particular area of medicine. Specialists are doctors with additional education and training in a specific organ or system, such as neurologists, cardiologists, or gastroenterologists.

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Why do I need a primary care doctor?

Many health insurance plans require members to choose a primary care physician (PCP). But beyond that, there are many reasons why having a primary physician benefits your health.



PCPs are who you call when you're feeling unwell.

Everyone needs medical care from time to time. When an unexpected health issue arises, primary care physicians are there to offer help and advice. They should be able to see you relatively quickly, either for an in-person appointment, a telehealth visit or to provide phone advice.

PCPs are experts in preventive care to keep you healthy and feeling great over the long-term.

At your annual visit, your primary care doctor will do a physical exam to check things like your blood pressure and weight, and order lab tests to look at your cholesterol levels, blood sugar and other markers of health. Based on the results, your PCP may recommend lifestyle changes or other treatments to reverse any issues or potential issues they find. When problems are caught early, they can be better managed and potentially prevented from getting worse.

PCPs help you manage your medications.

About 66 percent of U.S. adults take at least one prescription drug¹, and about 24 percent of adults take four or more medications². The likelihood of using prescription drugs rises with age. Medications can potentially interact with each other. A primary care physician can help you keep track of your medications or recommend changes in medications or doses. Primary care doctors can also consult with

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different specialists who may have prescribed the medications to make sure you're safe and not experiencing any unnecessary or worrisome side effects.

PCPs help you understand screening tests and vaccines.

Expert panels for major organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, the American Cancer Society and the CDC analyze the most up-to-date research to develop recommendations for screening tests and vaccines. The recommendations for any individual may vary based on specific risk factors. Your primary care doctor can keep you informed about the recommendations and any recent changes to them, and help you decide which tests are right for you.

PCPs are in your corner and become trusted partners in your health.

Over time, you will get to know your PCP doctor and your doctor will get to know you. They will know your personal medical history and your family medical history. They'll have a sense for how other aspects of your life could impact your health – such as your work, your sources of stress or your lifestyle. This can help your doctor provide you with care that's specific to your needs. This trusting relationship and lasting connection can help you maintain and manage your health throughout your life.

PCPs can help with mental health.

Mental health struggles are extremely common. About 10 percent of adults experience major depression in any given year, and 20 percent will at some point during their lives³. About 19 percent of U.S. adults have had an anxiety disorder in the last year, while 31 percent will experience an anxiety disorder at some time during their lives⁴. Primary care physicians are trained to screen a patient's mental health and ask whether you are having any difficulty sleeping or experiencing other changes that could indicate you need help. Primary care physicians can treat many mental health issues, and if needed, can connect their patients with therapists, psychiatrists or other forms of support.

PCPs know how to navigate our complex health system.

If you have a chronic or serious health condition, you may need a variety of tests or care from specialists. Navigating the healthcare system can be confusing. A primary care physician can help steer you through our complex system, coordinate your care with specialists and make sure your questions are answered.

References

1. <https://hpi.georgetown.edu/rxdrugs/>
2. <https://www.kff.org/health-costs/poll-finding/public-opinion-on-prescription-drugs-and-their-prices/>
3. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/2671413>
4. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder>



What matters to me?

Considerations when choosing a PCP

Ideally, your relationship with your primary care physician is going to last for years. When selecting a PCP, you may want to consider a number of factors about the physician and their practice.

Hours and location: Location, hours and availability may impact where you want to receive primary care. Some PCP practices offer extended and weekend hours, or the option of telehealth appointments.

By considering the location and hours, you help ensure that receiving primary care is:

- Convenient
- Available when you need it

Professional credentials: A primary care physician's board certification could be in internal medicine, family medicine, or pediatrics. To maintain board-certified status, your doctor must undergo continuing education and demonstrate knowledge of best practices in medicine, patient safety, and ethics.

By seeing a board-certified provider, you help ensure that:

- Your provider has received the highest level of accreditation within a given specialty.

In-network: Most health plans have negotiated special, discounted rates with certain doctors and hospitals in your area, called "in-network" or "preferred" providers. Choosing an in-network doctor

will help you avoid surprise out-of-network charges, or potentially even having to pay the full out of pocket cost because the doctor you've selected doesn't accept your insurance plan. (If you don't have insurance, some physicians will offer discounted rates. Inquire when you make your appointment.)

By choosing an in-network primary care doctor, you will most likely:

- Pay less out of pocket
- Avoid surprise charges

Services offered: There are some services that all PCP practices offer, such as well checks and other routine care. But a few (including Avance Care) offer more comprehensive services, including nutrition, behavioral and mental health services, and pain management. If these are important to you, be sure to select a PCP that offers them.

By choosing a primary care practice with expanded services, you help ensure that you have ready access to:

- Nutrition services
- Behavioral and mental healthcare
- Pain management services



List your potential primary care physicians here.

Name: _____
Phone: _____

Name: _____
Phone: _____

Name: _____
Phone: _____



Checklist: Questions to ask before your appointment

Getting started

- Is the physician taking on new patients?
- How long is the wait for an appointment?
- Is the physician in-network?
- Are there extended or weekend hours?

Services

- Where will procedures take place?
- Which hospital or hospitals does the physician refer to or work with?
- Do you offer telemedicine?
- Does the practice offer behavioral healthcare?
- Does the practice offer mental healthcare?
- Does the practice offer nutrition services?
- Does the practice offer women's health/gynecological services?

Personal preferences

- Do I prefer a male or female physician, or is either OK?
- What languages does the physician speak?
- Are translators available?
- Is the office staff friendly and professional?
- What is the office environment like?

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Preparing for Your Appointment

To make the most of your time with your physician, a little preparation can go a long way. When thinking about your medical concerns, it can be helpful to prioritize them to ensure that these are addressed.

Checklist: How to prepare for your first visit with your new primary care doctor

- Transfer your medical records so your new doctor will have a better understanding of your medical history.
- Know your preferred pharmacy location and phone number.
- Write down a list of your medications and dosages.
 - Include any vitamins, supplements, herbal remedies or any other alternative health treatments you've tried.
- Fill out any requested forms, such as family health history, in advance.
- Gather emergency room summaries, discharge papers, X-ray or MRI images, and other test results to bring with you.
- Think about any questions you have for your doctor. Write them down to help you remember to ask them during your appointment.
- If you've been experiencing any recent symptoms, keep a journal of your symptoms and when you're experiencing them. Bring this with you.
- Bring a pen and paper to take any notes about what your doctor tells you.
- Consider bringing a friend or family member if you feel that would benefit you. But remember, this is your time with your doctor, so make sure your companion understands what if any help you'd like from them during the appointment, or if you just want them to listen and take notes.
- Bring your insurance card.
- If you feel more comfortable speaking in another language, contact the doctor's office in advance to see if an interpreter can be arranged.



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After Your First Visit

Physician: _____

Health System: _____

Did I feel comfortable during the appointment?



Did the physician listen?



Did he or she encourage me to ask questions?



Was the care team and physician respectful and attentive to my needs?



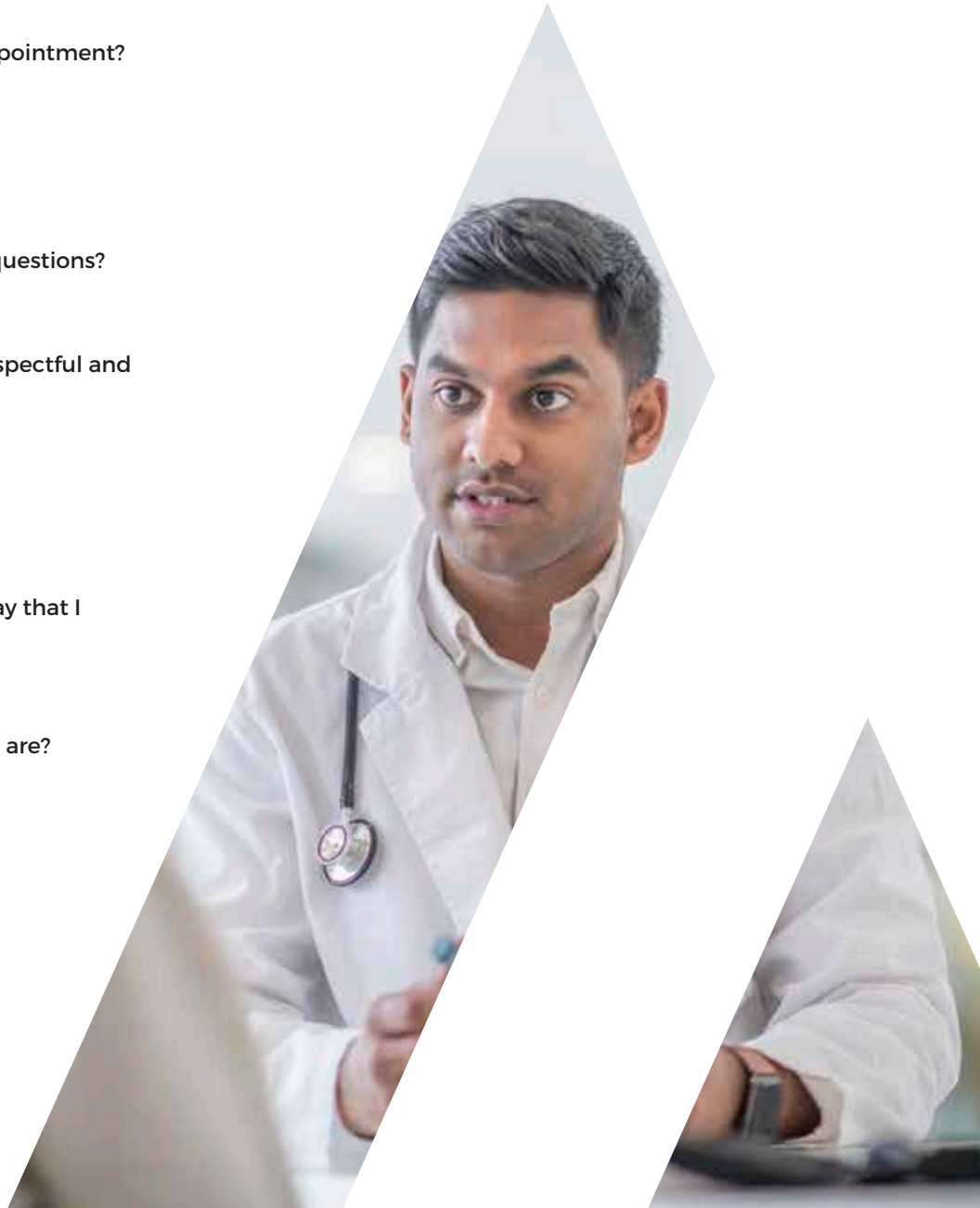
Was the office staff courteous?



Did my doctor explain things in a way that I understood?



Do I understand what my next steps are?



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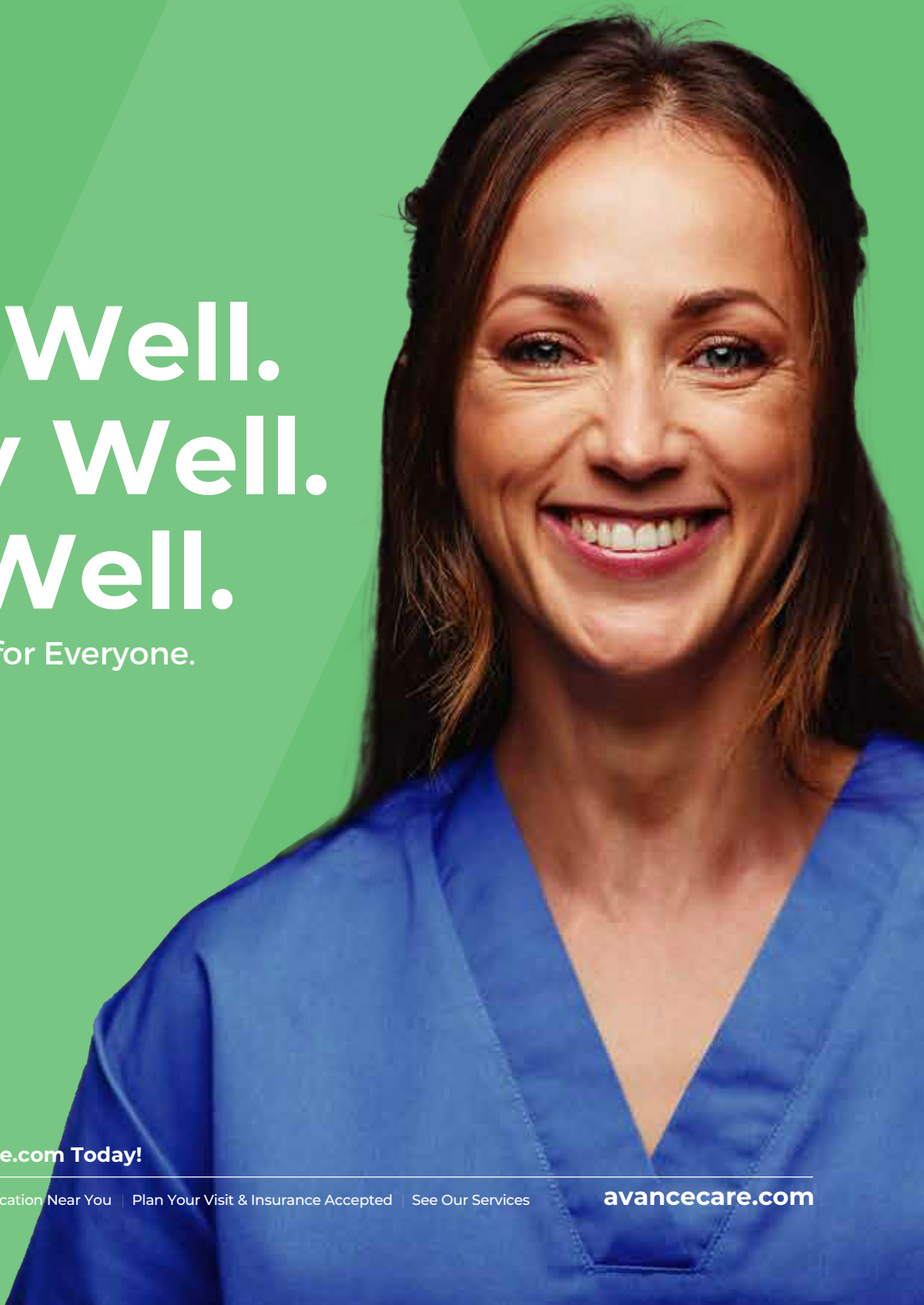
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What Our Patients Have to Say

“I am so glad I found Avance Care! Not only am I able to get most of my appointments right away (unlike 6-8+ weeks for my prior doctors) due to their extended hours and weekend appointments, but every appointment I've been to has been very thorough and the provider takes her time and has the patience to answer any questions and doesn't rush you out of there like most places do. On top of that everyone that works there...is extremely nice and goes out of their way to help you. Again, I'm so thankful (and lucky) to have finally found a place that I trust and like so much. Thank you!”

– K Pearce

“My Avance Care provider is amazing. He is very professional and patient and cares about helping you feel better...I strongly recommend Avance Care. Also, the service I receive is excellent each time. The office is always warm and welcoming with a great experience.”

– C Ratchford

“From the front office staff to the clinical staff my experience was great! The staff is friendly and efficient. The phlebotomist was very kind...The doctor actually listened to me and answered my questions.”

– B Sheppard