

Choosing a Pediatrician

Choosing your baby's doctor several months before her expected arrival is a good idea. This way, you won't feel rushed and can take the time to make the right decision. During the first few years of life, your baby will have frequent visits for routine checkups and illness; so selecting a healthcare professional you trust is important.

Decide which type of healthcare provider

Different types of healthcare professionals are qualified to care for your baby:

A pediatrician is a medical doctor with specialized training in caring for children from birth through adolescence.

A family physician or general medical practitioner (GMP) is a physician who is educated and trained in family practice, which is medical care that covers every member of the family for well and sick care. You already may have a family physician for your own healthcare.

A nurse practitioner (NP) is a registered nurse (RN) with advanced education and training. Nurse practitioners often work in partnership with a licensed physician.

Once you've determined what type of professional you would like to consider, find prospective doctors through these sources.

- Recommendations from friends who have children
- Your midwife
- Your local hospital's referral service
- Medical schools and medical directories
- The American Board of Pediatrics

Determine your insurance company's requirements

Check out the rules of your insurance policy prior to choosing your baby's doctor. You may have to designate your baby's doctor for your health insurance carrier, or you may be required to have your selection approved in advance. Many health plans have strict rules about which doctors you can visit, so it's important to determine if your choice of primary care physician also decides which specialists and which hospitals you will be able to use if your baby should need specialized care, since oftentimes these are linked together by the rules of a health plan.

Consider your parenting philosophy

Choose a doctor who has a similar philosophy with regard to important parenting issues, since most parents turn to their pediatrician for advice and guidance on more than just health-related issues. While this similarity in outlook is not crucial, it certainly makes for a more complete and enjoyable relationship that allows open conversation and precludes the need to avoid topics on which you disagree.

A like-thinking pediatrician understands your starting point when advising a particular course of action, and is more likely to prescribe one that suits your ideals. An easy way to find out what a doctor's opinion is to ask open questions, such as, "What are your recommendations about breastfeeding?" Here are just a few of the important topics you should consider:

Feeding – Does the doctor support your goals for breastfeeding?

Sleep – What is the doctor's opinion on sleep-related issues, such as co-sleeping and letting the baby cry her self to sleep? Are her views similar to yours?

Immunizations – Will the doctor provide you with ample information to make decisions about various vaccinations? Do his standard recommendations suit you? If you choose not to immunize does he support you decision?

Discipline – Does the doctor believe in the same approach towards discipline as yours?

Take the time to interview prospective doctors

Most medical professionals are happy to provide a brief interview meeting at no charge. This gives you an opportunity to meet the doctor and ask questions. Here are a few tips to make this a productive event:

- Make an appointment.

- Arrive early and observe the waiting room, staff and other patients. Is the staff helpful? Is the atmosphere child-friendly? Is the office clean and tidy? How long do people wait for their appointments?

- Be prepared with a brief list of questions.

- Stick to your most important topics.

- Refrain from small talk or lengthy explanations.

- Remember that your main purpose is to listen, not to talk.

Before your interview

If you do a little research and handle the technical details before your appointment, you can use your time with the doctor to obtain answers to your most important questions.

You can obtain information about a doctor, such as certifications and residency background, from:

- The American Board of Pediatrics
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- The American Medical Association

You often can get information from a receptionist or secretary at the doctor's office. First, ask for a brochure or other written information about the doctor and the practice. If the following information isn't covered, then call the office and ask for the following:

The background and experience of the doctor. (Asking for a verbal answer from the doctor during your upcoming appointment may well take up a large portion of your meeting.)

What are office hours? Are there evening or weekend hours?

How is billing handled?

What insurance is accepted?

What are your after-hours and emergency procedures?

What hospitals is the doctor affiliated with?

How do you handle questions by telephone?

Will my doctor personally see us for every scheduled appointment?

If he is unavailable, who will see us?

How many doctors share this office?

Do you have a special waiting room or a separate entrance for sick children, or how do you separate them from others?

Do you have a lactation specialist in the office? If not, can you recommend one?

Interview questions

Arrive at your appointment to interview a medical professional with your list of questions. Don't ask about issues that sound good but don't really matter to you; the meeting likely will be short, maybe five to 15 minutes (ask in advance how much time you will have). Stay focused on your own priorities. Relax and be friendly, but stay on track. Here is an assortment of sample questions to help you create your own list:

Can you explain how we will work together during our baby's first year?

Will you examine our baby at our home?

What is your typical advice to new parents about...

Circumcision?

Breastfeeding?

Bottle feeding?

Sleeping through the night?

Immunizations?

Can we come to you with questions about non-medical issues, like feeding or behavior?

What do we need to know about our newborn's health and care?

After your interview

Consider the answers to these questions to help you make your final decision:

Is the office conveniently located for you?

How long did you have to wait in the waiting room?

Did you feel good about the office and staff?

Did the doctor listen thoughtfully to your questions?

How willingly and thoroughly did the doctor answer questions?

What was his attitude when he answered them?

Do you feel comfortable with the doctor's specific child-rearing philosophy?

Did you feel that you could freely ask questions?

Did the doctor appear knowledgeable and current with his information and advice?

Would you feel comfortable bringing your baby to this person for care?

Would you feel confident having this doctor handle an emergency with your child?

adapted from ***Gentle Baby Care*** by Elizabeth Pantley. (McGraw-Hill, 2003)