After graduation, how do I find a doctor? [1]

Alice,

After I graduate and move away from home, from town, from anyone I've ever known: how do I pick a doctor? How do I even find a doctor to pick?

? Looking for a doctor

Answer

Dear Looking for a doctor,

Kudos to you for thinking ahead! Graduation or moving away from home can be an exciting and overwhelming time, but being proactive about finding a health care provider may help make the transition a little smoother. The term provider is used because a range of professionals—nurses, nurse practitioners, physicians, physician assistants, and many more—provide health care. When selecting your team (e.g., primary care provider, dentist, etc.) it may also be helpful to keep in mind that health care providers don't just manage an individual's current health needs, they also play a vital role in preventative care. Assuming that you're moving within the United States, the options for finding and choosing a provider may depend on your health insurance coverage as well as personal preferences.

So, where do you begin? If you have insurance through your parents, spouse, partner, employer, or public insurance program, you can contact the insurance provider or visit their website for a list of approved providers in your area. Some health insurance plans require that you choose a primary care provider from their approved list of providers; another reason why it may be beneficial to review your insurance plan. As you meet people who live in your area, it may be helpful to ask for recommendations. Then, make sure to confirm that the recommended provider is within your network. It's also possible that your insurance coverage is through a health maintenance organization (HMO) [3]. In this case, you will belong, as a patient, to an already established network of providers where your primary care provider is responsible for coordinating your care. For example, if you need to see a specialist, your primary care provider will refer you to someone within the network.

If you're uninsured, there are a number of options to investigate. An uninsured individual may first want to check if they qualify for free or subsidized health care through the government. Almost all children and pregnant women qualify for care under Medicaid and people ages 19 to 64 with low income may also qualify. If an uninsured individual isn't eligible for this type of care, the next step may be to look into individual health insurance plans. Check out healthcare.gov.
to learn more about Medicaid qualifications and to find information about specific health insurance options in your state.

In addition to finding insurance coverage, an uninsured individual may also search for a community health clinic. These clinics are set up to treat those without insurance and those who don’t qualify for Medicaid or Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) coverage. They provide care for individuals regardless of their ability to pay for primary or prenatal care and might also cover more specific health care needs by offering specialized referrals for mental health, substance abuse, and sexually transmitted infections (STI) such as HIV/AIDS. In addition to community health clinics, there are also options for specific reproductive needs, such as Planned Parenthood clinics. To find out more about reproductive health resources, you might check out whom to see for an STI.

Insurance considerations aside, another thing you might think about is finding a provider that’s a good match for you. This means weighing factors such as the provider’s location, availability and appointment times, friendliness and helpfulness of the office staff, as well as reviews and recommendations from friends, family, and coworkers. Other variables you might look into could include:

- Office hours
- Emergency availability
- Average wait during appointments
- Number of patients booked per hour
- Whether patients may choose the specialist they want to see
- Rapport with the health care provider during the first visit

If you have an immediate health concern, it’s recommended that you seek emergency medical care, regardless of your insurance situation. Also, seeing a health care provider is as much about keeping you healthy as it is making you better when you’re sick. Check out healthfinder.gov to find out what preventative services may be recommended as well as other information about personal wellness strategies. Because you’re also a part of the team that helps keep you healthy. Entering the real world? can be daunting, but hopefully you now feel fully armed with the information you need to pick your new health care provider(s).

May good health be with you? no matter where you end up!

Alice!

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