

# BE Healthy

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Boston Public Health Commission

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## Consumerism: Choosing Dr. Quality

Defining quality health care is not easy — it means different things to different people.

One federal agency comes close: “Doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right person, and having the best possible results.”

Sounds good, but what does that really mean, and more important, how do you find it?

It starts with selecting a primary care physician (PCP).

PCPs, most of whom are family practitioners, internists or pediatricians, are mostly responsible for defining a medical problem and treating it or making referrals to specialists as necessary.

PCPs are usually the first doctor seen for a medical complaint. They are responsible for the majority of an individual's care, while specialists are a distant second. It

is the PCP's job to perform regular check-ups to ensure good health and recommend required screenings to prevent or detect illnesses in their early stages.

The best way to choose a primary care physician is to carefully consider the traits you desire in a doctor rather than rely on someone else's opinion. That is not to say that recommendations from family, friends,

or a hospital's referral service don't work out. Nor does that mean that doctors assigned through health care plans will lead to trouble. On the contrary, both of those methods may work out quite well.

However you come upon a doctor to be your PCP, a productive relationship will depend on the answers to a few basic questions.

Does your doctor listen to you? Does he or she explain things clearly? Are you encouraged to ask questions? Does your doctor treat you with respect? Do the recommended treatments have good results?

There are also several other considerations when choosing a primary care physician:

### **Male or female; young or more experienced**

Comfort is a factor. Some prefer doctors of their own sex. Others prefer an older, experienced doctor,

regardless of gender. And still others may feel more comfortable with a younger doctor. Race and language also play a role, especially if a patient is more comfortable with a doctor who looks like them or shares a similar ethnic background. If language is a barrier, look for a medical office that, at a minimum, provides an interpreter.

**The best way to choose a primary care physician is to carefully consider the traits you desire in a doctor rather than rely on someone else's opinion.**

### **Location and access**

Convenience is another factor. Because the PCP is the doctor you see most frequently, consider the amount of traveling time to their office. Also consider your schedule. You might need a doctor who offers weekend or extended weekday visits.

There are further considerations. How easy is it to contact the doctor's office? Do they respond to telephone calls or e-mails? Is there someone available to offer advice over the phone for common complaints? Who covers for the doctor in an emergency or during vacations? Is it someone in the same office?

### **Hospital affiliation and referrals**

Hospital affiliation and specialty referrals must be considered as well. Some people have a strong preference for a particular hospital. If so, it is important to make sure the PCP has privileges to practice at that hospital and uses the specialists there as well. Affiliating specialists are especially important to those with chronic illnesses. For instance, cardiac patients will want to maintain their relationship with their current cardiologist in addition to their primary care physician.

### **Board certification**

A doctor is board certified if, after completing medical school and hospital training, he or she has passed a written (and often oral) examination in one of 24 medical specialties boards. The certification is intended to measure medi-

cal knowledge, clinical judgment, and expertise in the specialty. PCPs are typically board certified in internal medicine, family practice, and pediatrics, although some women use their gynecologist as their PCP.

To check on board certification of a particular doctor, contact the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine at (800) 377-0550 or [www.massmedboard.org](http://www.massmedboard.org).

### **Electronic medical records**

The use of electronic medical records, or EMRs, is increasing in private practice. The EMR allows your doctor to view lab and x-ray reports and coordinate your care with specialists and other health care professionals involved in your treatment.

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A face-to-face talk with a doctor is important to establish trust and comfort.

## A patient's duties

Good health care depends upon a good partnership between a patient and a health care provider.

A partnership is a two-way street. Patients bear some of the load. Patients must explain clearly their discomfort or pain.

It's not enough to say “I don't feel well.” That doesn't provide a doctor enough information to make a diagnosis. Doctors are trained to ask people about the details of their medical condition, but sometimes they don't ask the right questions or ask them in the right way.

Here are a few hints to make a visit to the doctor more productive:

### **Be specific in your complaints**

How do you not feel well? Does your head ache? Does your chest hurt? Do you have a sore that has not healed?

Tell the doctor when the problem started and how or if it has changed over time. Providing detailed information helps the doctor put together a puzzle with as many pieces as possible. Although it may seem like the doctor asks a lot of questions, keep in mind that the more information you share the easier it is to pinpoint the problem.

Being clear about pain is especially important.

Pain is subjective — no one else but you can define it. But there are different types of pains and each type may indicate a different problem. Being specific is important.

What does the pain feel like — is it dull or sharp, mild or severe? Do you experience it only when performing a specific activity or do you feel it all the time, even at rest? Is it a throbbing pain or is it steady? Does it stay in one place or does it spread to other parts?

Describe the pain in your own words even if it sounds silly. Telling the doctor that the pain feels like a toothache or like a sledgehammer hitting you is very helpful information. The doctor now has a very good idea of what you are feeling. This description helps narrow down the choices and potential treatments.

Most back pains, for instance, are caused by muscle strains or pulls and can be treated with over the counter pain medicine and exercise, while severe radiating pain may indicate the need for stronger pain medication and other interventions.

### **Make a list, ask questions and take notes**

Making a list of your concerns, including everything from specific pains to medical definitions, is

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## Physician Profile

Contact the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine at (800) 377-0550 or [www.massmedboard.org](http://www.massmedboard.org) to find the following information on a doctor.

- Date of licensure in Massachusetts
- Education and training (residency)
- Medical specialties
- Board certification(s)
- Professional information
  - Address and telephone number
  - Insurance plans accepted
  - Hospital affiliations
  - Availability of translation services
- Awards, research and publications
- Malpractice claims paid, hospital discipline, and criminal convictions in the past ten years
- Disciplinary actions of the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine in the past ten years

# Know your choices

As the new regulations implementing the Health Care Reform law begin to take shape, it is important for Massachusetts residents to understand how these changes will affect their health care choices. These regulations will be administered by the Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector, a quasi-public authority. The purpose of the Connector is to provide more affordable health insurance product options.

Four insurers offer these plans through the Connector's Commonwealth Care: Fallon Community Health Plan, Network Health, Neighborhood Health Plan, and Boston Medical Center HealthNet Plan. To enroll in a plan, a resident must complete an application using either the 'Virtual Gateway' or a paper application. The resident will receive a packet with the four options from each company. The Virtual Gateway is a service available at many hospitals and community centers that allows residents to apply on a computer with help from personnel at the location. Once the packet is received, the resident must choose one plan and enroll. Within 14 days of being sent a packet by Commonwealth Care, if the resident has not chosen a plan, he or she will be assigned to one. The resident can choose to change his or her plan within 60 days after that. If the resident is already eligible for the Uncompensated Care Pool, however, there is no need to apply because all such residents will automatically be sent a letter of approval from Commonwealth Care.

For more information, visit [www.mass.gov/connector](http://www.mass.gov/connector). You can also speak to a Commonwealth Care Customer Service Representative with questions about requesting a paper application or finding a Virtual Gateway center by calling (877) MA-ENROLL (623-6765) (TTY: (877) 623-7773 for those with hearing loss). Commonwealth Care receives calls Monday through Friday, 6 a.m. to 5 p.m.

## Informed decisions lead to quality care

A 1999 report by the Institute of Medicine estimates that as many as 98,000 people die in U.S. hospitals each year as the result of lapses in patient safety. Often, the lapses in safety are simple and avoidable, and are due to weaknesses in the health care system, such as lack of timely access to medical records or medication histories. No single part of the health care system can achieve change by itself. Collaboration is essential. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts is committed to working collaboratively with every part of the health care system to improve health care quality. Everyone in the health care system — patients, hospitals, health plans, and physicians — has a role to play in increasing overall patient safety. The U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has developed this list of the five most important things patients can do to contribute to their own good health:

1. *Understand and ask questions if anything is unclear*
2. *Keep a list of all medications that you take*
3. *Get the results of any test or procedure that you have had*
4. *Talk to your physician about which hospital is best for your health needs*
5. *Understand and ask questions about your surgery*

Many health plans as well as the state and federal governments now offer online tools for consumers to aid them in choosing doctors and hospitals, and even discovering how much certain medical procedures typically cost. Proponents of such tools maintain that providing patients with data about how well hospitals and doctors follow common patient safety procedures, or about the quality of outcomes their patients have after undergoing

specific procedures, will allow patients to make informed decisions when choosing where they want to go for medical care. Proponents call this availability of cost and quality information "transparency." Many argue that transparency helps individual patients find the best quality care for themselves while at the same time motivating health care providers to make the quality of the care they deliver even better and more efficient. Transparency is good for the health care system as a whole.

Most Massachusetts health plans offer online resources that list individual doctors and physician groups that have received care excellence awards; offer cost and quality measurements of hospitals; and provide cost estimates for specific medical procedures and treatments. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts members, for instance, can find this information at [www.bluecross-ma-takecontrol.com](http://www.bluecross-ma-takecontrol.com).

The Massachusetts Department of Health and Human Services offers a hospital comparison tool at [www.mass.gov/healthcareqc](http://www.mass.gov/healthcareqc). This tool provides cost and quality ratings of treatment of nine specific conditions in hospitals in Massachusetts. These conditions include heart attack, stroke, coronary artery bypass graft, congestive heart failure, gastrointestinal hemorrhage, hip fracture, hip replacement, pneumonia, and childbirth.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offers a similar tool that describes how often hospitals have provided recommended treatments for adults with heart attack, heart failure, pneumonia, and surgery. The website is [www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov](http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov).

The Leapfrog Group is an organization that surveys hospitals based upon what steps they are taking to reduce preventable medical mistakes. The organization rates hospitals based on that data and makes the rating available at [www.leapfroggroup.org](http://www.leapfroggroup.org).

## There's no such thing as a silly question. Especially in health care.

At Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, we are committed to working with hospitals and physicians to improve health care quality and safety. Patients, too, can play an important role by following these guidelines from the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality:

1. Ask questions if anything is unclear.
2. Keep a list of medications that you take.
3. Get the results of any tests or procedures.
4. Ask questions about your surgery.



MASSACHUSETTS

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## Voices of Inclusion

The Boston Center for Community & Justice (BCCJ) and the Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation will host the third annual **Voices of Inclusion Summit** on **December 12 from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.**

**Voices of Inclusion III** will explore the issue of obesity and its correlation to racial, ethnic and economic disparity.

BCCJ will recognize three awardees at the Summit for their sustained leadership in addressing disparities issues in health care. Mayor Thomas M. Menino will be recognized with the Voices of Inclusion Leadership Award for his citywide public policy initiatives that keep Bostonians healthy; Brandy Cruthird of Body By Brandy 4 Kidz will be recognized with the Voices of Inclusion Innovator Award for her role in the creation of a partnership between Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, Children's Hospital of Boston and United Way of Massachusetts Bay to reduce the rates of childhood obesity; and Dr. Walter Willett, an internationally renowned nutritionist of the Harvard School of Public Health, will be recognized with the Voices of Inclusion Visionary Award for 25 years of research on the long-term health consequences of food choices.

**For more information, contact Kathleen Magrane at (617) 451-5010 ext. 13 or [kmagrane@bostonccj.org](mailto:kmagrane@bostonccj.org).**



## Questions & Answers



**JudyAnn Bigby, M.D.**  
Director, Community Health Programs  
Brigham and Women's Hospital

**1. Patients often complain that they have trouble understanding their doctors, and leave their office with a poor understanding of their diagnosis or recommended treatments. What steps can be taken to bridge this communication gap?**

Both doctors and their patients should take this problem on because good communication means that both parties should try their best to communicate. Doctors often do not take the time to explain everything to patients. Research shows that doctors spend less time explaining things to patients who

might be most likely to need more time, including patients who have less formal education or don't speak English well. There are several things that patients can do to make sure they have the best opportunity to hear and understand what the doctor said.

First, patients should have their own agenda when they go for an appointment. Keep a notebook or journal of your medical appointments and write down the questions you want to ask at your visit. Write down the answers you hear from the doctors.

Ask the doctor to write down things for you. If a doctor gives you a diagnosis, ask her to write it down for you and explain what it means in non-medical terms. Ask for written instructions about tests like x-rays or MRIs that she recommends and what the tests will tell you.

Ask for written instructions about any medication changes that the doctor recommends.

Some patients tape record their conversations with their doctors, especially if they are discussing what to expect with a surgical procedure or cancer treatment, for example.

Once you think you understand the diagnosis and treatment plan, tell your doctor what you think in your own words to make sure you have it right.

**2. Many people are hesitant to ask their doctor questions — they don't want to take up their time, or they think they will not understand. How do you encourage patients to ask questions?**

Patients should always feel that they have the right to ask questions. If you have questions, tell your doctor at the BEGINNING of the visit that there are some things you want to discuss. Write down your questions so you remember them. Many patients make the mistake of waiting to the end of the appointment as they are walking out the door to ask their questions. By then, doctors have to rush off to see the next patient and may not take as much time as is necessary to answer the questions. If the doctor says he does not have time to answer all the questions ask if there is another staff member, like a nurse, who might be available to answer then or make another appointment.

**3. How do you encourage patients to assume a more active role in their health care?**

It is very important for people to be active in their health care. They should report unusual symptoms, let their doctors know when therapies are not working for them, and learn how to manage their own medical conditions whether that means following a special diet, exercising, or getting regular check-ups.

## The Internet is Not Your Doctor

The Internet is a good source of health information. But be careful. Anyone can develop a web page and provide health information, whether it's accurate or not. Before you search the Internet, read this.

### Check the Source

Who runs the site and why? Read the "About Us" section or mission statement. Are the organization and purpose clearly defined? Are you able to contact the organization? Look for a street or e-mail address and telephone number, usually under "Contact Us."

### Check the Quality of Information

Who writes or reviews the information? Are they experts in the subject matter?

Is the information medical research or a person's opinion? Look for wording such as "Written by Dr. William Jones, National Cancer Institute."

Are the data current? Look for dates on documents. Since treatments can change quickly, it's important to know that you are reading current information.

Are advertisements clearly labeled? Beware of sites that make unbelievable claims or encourage you to purchase products favored by the sponsor.

### Protect Your Privacy

Does the site ask for private information? If so, read the "Privacy" link to find out how your information will be used. If uncomfortable, do not submit personal data.

### Use the information wisely

The Internet does not replace your doctor. Don't attempt to diagnose a problem. Rather, use the Internet to gain more insight into your particular condition or illness.



The Internet can be a great source of health information, but not everything may be reliable.

Healing the racial divide in health care

## Bostonians come in many flavors.

But we're working to make health care excellent for everyone.

Boston is rich in ethnic and racial differences. They make our city vibrant.

But when those differences show up in the quality of health and health care, that's a cause for concern. And action.

This is a national problem that Boston shares. Last year, a survey by the Boston Public Health Commission revealed that Boston's racial and ethnic groups have strikingly different risks of illness and death.

The percentage of babies born prematurely and at a low birth-weight to black mothers is nearly double what it is for white mothers. Black men are twice as likely to die from diabetes as white men.

Latino Bostonians are more likely to be hospitalized for or die from asthma and have a higher incidence of diabetes and HIV. Asian people in Boston have higher rates of tuberculosis and hepatitis B.

Mayor Thomas Menino formed a task force to find ways to eliminate disparities in health and challenged hospitals and community health centers, among others, to take concrete steps to make the quality of health care excellent for all Bostonians.

Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH) and Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) provided significant funds for the City's special disparities

program and along with other hospitals agreed to take immediate actions that include:

- measuring the quality of patient care and patient satisfaction by race, ethnicity, language, and education;
- improving education and cultural competence for doctors, nurses and other caregivers, and staff and patients;
- helping patients take an active role in their care;
- working to diversity their professional workforce and governing boards;
- collaborating closely with members of the community.

BWH established the Health Equity Program to reduce disparities in neighboring communities. The hospital's new Center for Surgery and Public Health will, among other things, examine disparities in surgical care.

MGH created the Disparities Solutions Center to work with providers, insurers and community groups in Boston and nationwide. The hospitals and Partners HealthCare are putting more than \$6 million into finding and fixing disparities in care.

If there's one place where we should all be the same, it's in the excellence of our health care.

More information at Boston Public Health Commission at [www.bphc.org](http://www.bphc.org)



## Examples of Online Sources for Reliable Health Care Information

### Government Agencies

- **National Cancer Institute**  
[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)
- **MedlinePlus**  
[www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov)
- **National Institutes of Health**  
[www.health.nih.gov](http://www.health.nih.gov)

### Non-profit Organizations

- **American Cancer Society**  
[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)
- **American Heart Association**  
[www.heart.org](http://www.heart.org)
- **American Academy of Family Physicians**  
[www.familydoctor.org](http://www.familydoctor.org)

### Hospitals

- **Brigham and Women's Hospital**  
<http://healthgate.partners.org>
- **Massachusetts General Hospital**  
[www.massgeneral.org/pflc/learning/index.asp](http://www.massgeneral.org/pflc/learning/index.asp)
- **Mayo Clinic**  
[www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)

### Insurance Companies/HMOs

- **Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts**  
[www.ahealthyme.com](http://www.ahealthyme.com)

For additional resources, visit [www.bannerbehealthy.com](http://www.bannerbehealthy.com).

BRIGHAM AND WOMEN'S HOSPITAL

**PARTNERS**  
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A charitable non-profit organization

MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL

# The fine print on medications

Over 700,000 Americans make emergency room visits each year for negative reactions to medications, according to a recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. People suffer accidental overdoses and allergic reactions to prescription, over the counter, and herbal drugs, as well as dietary supplements. Although the elderly are at higher risk, harmful reactions to medications were noted in all age groups.

Here is what you need to know:

## The name of the medicine

Write it down and compare it to the label on the prescription bottle to make sure it is correct.

## Know your allergies

If you're allergic to a medicine or an ingredient in the medicine, tell the doctor.

## Know the dosage

For example, if the doctor prescribed 25 mg tablets, tell the pharmacist if the label indicates 50 mg tablets.

## Know the frequency of dosage

How often should you take it and is there a particular time of the day to take it? Some medications may call for once a day in the morning or before you go to bed, while others require four or more a day. Do you need to take it with food or on an empty stomach?

## What happens if I forget to take it on time?

That depends on the medicine. Sometimes you should take the pill as soon as you remember; other times wait until the next scheduled dose. Ask your doctor for directions.

## How long do I take the medicine?

Some illnesses, such as high blood pressure, require long-term medications, while a minor infection requires a few days or weeks of antibiotics. Take the drugs for the prescribed length of time. Make sure you finish all the pills. People make the mistake of discontinuing the medication when they start feeling better. Stopping your medicine too early can cause the illness to return and make it more difficult to treat in the future.

## Check for possible drug interactions

Other drugs, including OTC and herbal drugs, may interfere or interact with your prescription. Tell the doctor all the medicine you take, including vitamin pills and aspirin. Ask if you should not take certain foods or drinks while on the medication. You should not drink alcohol when taking many drugs.



## Ask about side effects

Many medicines have unpleasant side effects, such as headache or nausea. Some cause drowsiness, making it unsafe to drive a car. Know what to expect, but tell your doctor if the side effects are very uncomfortable.

Request written material about the medicine if you require additional information.

Keep an up to date list of all your medicines. If your doctor changes your medicine ask for a new list.

# Of rights and medicine

Medical professionals and health advocates stress the importance of taking charge of your own care by exercising your rights as a patient.

But what exactly are those rights?

There's currently no federal patient rights law, but each state has some form of legislation addressing the issue.

The Massachusetts Legislature enacted a patient bill of rights in 1979. The law granted patients, among other things, the right to receive prompt emergency life-saving treatment regardless of the ability to pay; the right to participate in making decisions about their own treatment; and the right to inspect their own medical records, and that those records will remain confidential except among those responsible for administering care.

The guarantee of privacy is also a major focus of a federal health care reform law co-sponsored by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., and former Sen. Nancy

Kassebaum, R-Kansas. A section of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), commonly known as the "Privacy Rule," significantly increases protections for health information, and sets limitations on who can see or receive a patient's health information.

Under the Privacy Rule, you can read, get a copy (at your expense) of your medical record, and request changes if you identify errors or omissions; decide who can view your record for non-medical purposes; and be informed on how your record was shared and used.

Health professionals involved in your care and a limited number of employees of insurers that pay for your care have complete access without your permission, as well as certain public authorities. For instance, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, during the

recent measles outbreak, had the right to the information on those infected in order to protect the public's health and safety.

But for the most part, individual health information cannot be released for non-medical purposes without your written permission. This means that your file should not be shared with marketers, a life insurer, a bank, or your employer unless you grant permission.

While privacy is a critical element of HIPAA, another part of the act limits the restrictions that a group health plan can place on benefits for pre-existing illnesses when a person changes health plans.

Prior to the passage of HIPAA, an individual who changed jobs and applied for group health insurance at the new job was often denied coverage for a pre-existing illness for a defined period of time, usually a year. This restriction applied only to pre-existing illnesses, and did not affect the treatment for other conditions.

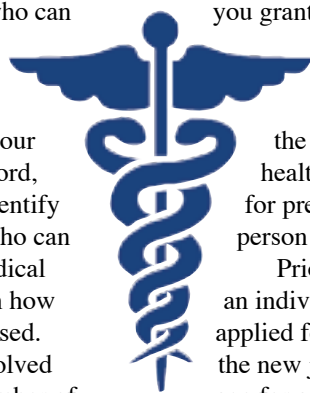
This meant, however, that a person

with diabetes would have to pay for treatment for the disease for a year until the health plan began picking up the charges. This process was repeated with each job change, often forcing people with serious illnesses to stay put rather than face the burden of expensive health care.

HIPAA prohibits group health plans from denying coverage for pre-existing medical conditions if the person can demonstrate uninterrupted health care insurance for at least a year prior to enrollment in the new plan. Upon job termination, an individual's current health insurer verifies uninterrupted coverage to ensure continuation of payment for the pre-existing illness.

There are limitations to this law, so it is a good idea to check with your benefits department before making a move to make sure your level of coverage continues at your new job.

Although it has limits, HIPAA is a landmark bill, and marks a significant advancement toward the protection of consumer health care rights and privileges.



## duties

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a helpful tool for you and your doctor. It keeps the visit on track and provides a quick reminder should you forget to bring up a subject.

Asking questions is critical. Though some doctors have a difficult time translating complicated medical terms and conditions into simple ordinary language, keep asking questions until you feel you understand the doctor's answers. If you still don't understand, ask the doctor to draw a diagram to provide further clarification. If you do not ask questions, the doctor may assume that you understand his explanation.

## Make a list of your medications

Be sure to include herbal medicines, such as Saw Palmetto (prostate) or Glucosamine (osteoarthritis) and over the counter (OTC) drugs. Herbal and OTC drugs can be quite powerful. There is a common misconception that, because they are available without a doctor's prescription, they are not really strong. Not so. Remember that many drugs now available OTC have previously been prescription drugs. Their ease of access has not necessarily reduced their potency. Also, you have to be very careful about drug interactions. A herbal drug may interact with a prescription drug, so it is important to mention all medications,

whether or not they require a prescription. In addition, tell the doctor about any allergies or reactions to medications you may have experienced.

## Take a list of your health history with you

It is possible that a previous illness has a bearing on your present complaint. Keep track of your own medical history using a notebook or journal to record your past illnesses, symptoms, and their treatments. Also record your previous hospitalizations, tests, surgeries, and medications. Ask your immediate family members about their medical history and write it down. Your risk of some diseases, such as breast and prostate cancers, is higher if a sibling or parent has the illness.

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## Share personal information

The doctor has heard it all before — no need to be embarrassed. Private as it may be to you the doctor may need to know the situation to help remedy the current complaint. Remember that the information you share is confidential and will be discussed only with others in-

**If you do not ask questions, the doctor may assume that you understand his explanation.**

involved in your treatment. Describe your personal life style as well. If you smoke or drink, are a vegetarian or a marathon runner, that information is very valuable.

Familiarize yourself with screening tests appropriate for your age, race, sex, and risk. If your doctor does not mention the tests — ask for them.

Before you leave the doctor's office, make sure you understand all that has been discussed. If there are instructions for you to follow, ask the doctor to write them or to provide a handout. Obtain brochures and other written material on your diagnosis.

## Follow-up

After you leave the office, call if you have additional questions, if your symptoms get worse, or if you have problems with the medication. Call if you have not received the results of your tests. Although the doctor or his office should follow up with you on such matters, it is not unusual for timely feedback to fall through the cracks. Take the situation in your own hands. Remember that this is a partnership. If the doctor's office fails to act, it is your responsibility to step up.

## Dr. Quality

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Some systems check for drug interactions or issue alerts for abnormal tests. The availability of your health information in one location improves quality and helps reduce medical errors.

## Preventive Care

One of the roles of the PCP is to recommend and order screening tests according to your race, age, gender, and risk. Screening guidelines have been tested and developed by various private and public health care organizations. It may be possible to determine how your physician group rates in this area from information distributed by Massachusetts Health Quality Partners (MHQP), a coalition of physicians, hospitals, and health plans, whose role is to promote improvement of health care services in the state.

From their web site it is possible to view clinical data, including compliance with certain screenings, for over 400 doctors' offices across the state. Unique to the site is a rating of patients' experience at the offices. You can find the information at [www.mhqp.org/quality/whatisquality.asp?nav=030000](http://www.mhqp.org/quality/whatisquality.asp?nav=030000).

Your health plan is also a good source of information on doctors, and often provides a quality profile on participating physicians.