

# You and Your Pediatrician



The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has developed this information to help you

- Choose a pediatrician.
- Prepare for office visits with your pediatrician.
- Know what to do if you have a question or an emergency health problem.

In choosing a pediatrician, you can know that an expert in children's health is treating your child.

## Why your child needs a pediatrician

Children have different health care needs than adults—both medical and emotional. Pediatricians are trained to prevent and manage health problems in infants, children, teens, and young adults. Older patients trust their pediatricians, because they have known one another for many years.

## Training

To become trained in pediatrics, a doctor must take special courses for 3 or more years after medical school. This is called *residency*. After residency, a doctor usually takes a long, detailed test given by the American Board of Pediatrics. After passing the test, the doctor is a board-certified pediatrician. He or she gets a certificate that you may see displayed at the office. The doctor can then become a Fellow (or member) of the American Academy of Pediatrics (FAAP). All of this background prepares your pediatrician to manage your child's total health care needs, including the following:

- Growth and development
- Illnesses
- Nutrition
- Immunizations
- Injuries
- Physical fitness

Your pediatrician will also work with you on other issues, such as the following:

- Behavior
- Emotional or family problems
- Learning and other school problems
- Preventing and dealing with drug abuse
- Puberty and other teen concerns
- Television, the Internet, and other media

Pediatricians also work with teachers and other adults in child care centers, schools, and after-school programs. If your child has a very special or complex problem, your pediatrician can refer her to another specialist for further help, if needed.

In addition, your pediatrician can advise you about complementary and alternative medicine treatments and which treatments are safe for children. It is important that your pediatrician be aware of all uses of complementary and alternative medicines. Some can result in serious side effects when used along with conventional medicine.

## Finding the right pediatrician for your child

Do not wait until your child is sick or needs a checkup to choose a pediatrician. Even if you recently moved, are changing insurance, or are having a baby, it is best to find a pediatrician as soon as you can. For recommendations about a pediatrician, ask other doctors you know, as well as family, friends, relatives, and coworkers. You may want to contact a nearby hospital, medical school, or your county medical society for a list of local pediatricians. Some health insurance plans may require you to choose a pediatrician from their approved network of doctors.

After you have a list of names, you may visit the pediatricians' offices to help you choose your child's doctor. While you are in the reception area, look around to see if it is clean. (But realize that children have been in it all day long.) Consider whether the office staff seems friendly and helpful.

Ask the office staff some questions, including the following:

- What are the office hours?
- Is emergency coverage available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week?
- Do nurses screen phone calls?
- If I cannot speak with the doctor, who will handle my questions?
- When is the best time to call with routine questions?
- Does the practice have an after-hours answering service?
- Is the after-hours phone service tied in with a university or children's hospital?
- Where are patients referred after hours?
- Is there access to specialists and intensive care if needed?
- Is payment due at the time of visit?
- How does the office handle billing?
- How are insurance claims handled?
- Is this pediatrician accepting new patients with my insurance or managed care plan?

Also prepare a list of questions to ask about the pediatrician including the following:

- What is his or her pediatric background?
- Does he or she have a subspecialty or area of pediatric interest? If so, what is it?
- To what hospital does he or she admit patients?
- Is he or she board certified through the American Board of Pediatrics?
- Is he or she a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics?
- Who are the physicians who will care for my child if my pediatrician is not available?
- Are they on staff at the same hospital? Are these physicians board certified?

These are just sample questions. Ask other questions about things that are important to you.

After your first visit with the pediatrician, ask yourself: Does this pediatrician listen, answer questions, and seem interested? Above all, ask yourself if you like and trust this person. If your instincts say "no," talk with the next pediatrician on your list.

When someone you know suggests a pediatrician, it is also helpful to ask that person some questions about the doctor, such as the following:

- Are all your questions answered by the pediatrician and the office staff?
- Do you think your children like the doctor?
- Does the pediatrician talk with and care about the children, and not just the parents?
- Does the pediatrician seem to know about current issues and advances in pediatric medicine?
- How helpful and friendly is the office staff?
- How well does the office staff manage your telephone calls?
- How does the office handle emergencies?
- Do you have to wait long before seeing the pediatrician?
- Is there anything about the pediatrician or the office that bothers you?

The American Academy of Pediatrics has an online pediatrician referral service for parents. For more information, please go to [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org), click on “You and Your Family,” and look for the “Pediatrician Referral Service” link.

## Preparing for office visits

Regular visits to the pediatrician are a key part of preventive health care. At each visit, the pediatrician, pediatric nurse practitioner, or pediatric resident will fully examine your child. This checkup will give your child’s pediatrician a chance to

- Make sure your child is eating well, growing well, and is healthy.
- Update immunizations.
- Track your child’s growth and development.
- Find physical problems before they become serious.
- Help inform you on how to keep your child healthy and safe.
- Answer all of your questions.

Infants and children need frequent checkups during the first 24 months of life. After 2 years of age most children do not need regular visits as often. Your pediatrician will schedule visits based on your child’s own needs. Ask your pediatrician how often your child needs a checkup.

Make sure you write down any questions you have before each office visit, so that you do not forget to ask them. Keep up-to-date records on your child’s growth and immunizations. Bring this information with you to each visit.

## Illnesses and injuries

All children get sick at one time or another. Minor illnesses like colds and coughs are common. This is especially true for children who are in child care or school, where they may be exposed to more infections from other children. It is also common for children to have many minor injuries, as well as other medical problems that will need your pediatrician’s attention.

If you are not sure your child needs to see the pediatrician, always call his or her office. The office staff can often tell you over the phone if your child needs to be seen and, if so, can set up an appointment. The pediatrician or nursing staff may give medical advice over the phone if an office visit is not needed.

## Calling your child’s pediatrician

You should *always* feel free to call your pediatrician’s office, either during office hours for routine questions or at any time for an emergency. Call right away if you are worried about your child. Sometimes a parent feels

## Recommended health care visits\*

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends regular health care visits at the following times:

- Before your baby is born (for first-time parents)
- Before your newborn is discharged from the hospital, and again within 48 to 72 hours for babies discharged before 2 full days of life
- During the first year of life—visits at about 2 to 4 weeks of age, and also at 2, 4, 6, 9, and 12 months of age
- During the second year of life—visits at 15, 18, and 24 months of age
- In early childhood—yearly visits from 2 through 5 years of age
- During the early school years—visits at 6, 8, and 10 years of age
- In adolescence and early adulthood—yearly visits from 11 through 21 years of age

\*Your own pediatrician may recommend additional visits.

there is a problem before symptoms actually show up. Always call and get proper medical advice. Realize, though, that sometimes your pediatrician may not be able to answer your questions without seeing your child first. When you are not sure whether to call, trust your instincts.

**Make the most of the phone.** Your pediatrician may prefer that you call with general questions during office hours. Some offices even have special “phone-in” times. Before you call, have a pen and paper ready to write down any instructions and questions. You could easily forget some details, especially when you are worried about your child. Be prepared to provide information about your child’s health.

- **Have your child near the phone**, if possible, to help you answer questions when you call your pediatrician. An older child may be able to tell you exactly where it hurts.
- **Take your child’s temperature** before you call. If your child has a fever, write down the temperature and time you took it.
- **Remind the doctor about past medical problems.** Do not expect your pediatrician to always remember your child’s medical condition. He or she cares for many children each day and may not remember that your child has asthma, seizures, or some other condition.
- **Be sure to mention medications.** If your child is taking any medication, including prescription or nonprescription drugs, inhalers, supplements, vitamins, herbal products, or home remedies, tell your pediatrician.
- **Keep immunization records at hand.** These are especially helpful if your child has an injury that may require a tetanus shot or if pertussis (whooping cough) is in your community.
- **Have your pharmacy phone number ready.**

**Unblock your telephone “call block,” and keep phone lines open** so that your pediatrician can return your call in a timely manner. Do not leave pager numbers. If you leave your cell phone number, be sure that you have your cell phone on and will be in an area where you can receive calls.

## Routine and emergency calls

Routine calls include questions about medicines, minor illnesses, injuries, behavior, or parenting advice. You will usually not need urgent care for a simple cold or cough, mild diarrhea, constipation, temper tantrums, or sleep problems. For these cases you may just need proper medical advice.

However, if your child has any of the following, call to find out if he needs to be seen:

- Vomiting and diarrhea that last for more than a few hours in a child of any age
- Rash, especially if there is also a fever
- Any cough or cold that does not get better in several days, or a cold that gets worse and is accompanied by a fever
- Cuts that might need stitches
- Limping or is not able to move an arm or leg
- Ear pain with fever, is unable to sleep or eat, is vomiting, has diarrhea, or is acting ill
- Drainage from an ear
- Sore throat or problems swallowing
- Sharp or persistent pains in the abdomen or stomach
- A rectal temperature of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher in a baby younger than 2 months of age
- Fever and vomiting at the same time
- Not eating for more than a day

Emergency calls require your pediatrician's prompt attention. But it is best to know what to do before a problem occurs. During a scheduled checkup, ask your pediatrician what to do and where to go should your child ever need emergency medical care. Learn basic first aid, including CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation). Keep emergency and poison center phone numbers posted by your telephone.

An infant or child needs emergency medical treatment **immediately** if he has any of the following:

- Bleeding that does not stop after applying pressure for 5 minutes
  - Suspected poisoning
  - Seizures (Rhythmic jerking and loss of consciousness)
  - Increasing trouble with breathing
  - Skin or lips that look blue, purple, or gray
  - Neck stiffness or rash with fever
  - Head injury with loss of consciousness, confusion, vomiting, or poor skin color
  - Blood in the urine
  - Bloody diarrhea or diarrhea that will not go away
  - Sudden lack of energy or is not able to move
  - Unconsciousness or lack of response
  - Acting strangely or becoming more withdrawn and less alert
  - Increasing or severe persistent pain
  - A cut or burn that is large, deep, or involves the head, chest, or abdomen
  - A burn that is large or involves the hands, groin, or face
- Call 911 (or your emergency number) for any severely ill or injured child.

## As your child grows

Your pediatrician can continue to be an important resource not only for illness or injury care, but for all sorts of health advice, including the following:

- Exercise
- Nutrition
- Being too thin or too heavy

- Emotional and behavioral problems
- Helping children cope with issues like divorce and death
- School or learning problems
- Family problems
- Media and Internet literacy
- Gun injury prevention

Your pediatrician can respond to your teen's special needs and can offer advice and counseling on

- Body changes during puberty
- Menstruation
- Growth and hygiene
- Coping and being happy with oneself and with others
- Substance abuse
- Dating and sexual issues
- Eating disorders
- Acne
- Birth control
- Violence and related problems
- Gang problems

## Immunizations and your child's health

Many childhood diseases can be prevented with regular health care visits and up-to-date immunizations. Children need shots to protect them from diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), measles, mumps, rubella (German measles), polio, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b, chickenpox, influenza, and pneumococcal infections.

Be sure your child is up-to-date with all needed vaccinations. It is the only way to protect your child against many serious diseases.

Your pediatrician can give you the latest information about new vaccines as they become available. At each checkup, ask your pediatrician if your child is fully immunized.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

## From your doctor

American Academy  
of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 60,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

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Web site—[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

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