

What is Primary Care?



Quick Reference Guide

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What is a primary care provider?

Your Primary Care Provider, or PCP, is the medical professional you visit for general, non-emergency medical visits. This includes regular exams and check-ups, routine screenings and laboratory tests, or major lifestyle changes. You can also see your PCP if you feel sick. If you need to see a specialist, your PCP will make referrals (depending on your insurance).



Are there different types of primary care providers?

Yes. Some PCPs have a focus on specific populations or body systems. These include:





- **Internists**, or internal medicine, focus on the health of adults, typically ages 18 – 65.
- **Pediatricians** see infants, children, adolescents and young adults.
- **Geriatrics** support older patients, typically above the age of 65 – although this range may vary.
- **Family Medicine** sees patients of different ages, allowing for an entire family or household to be seen by the same provider.
- **Obstetrics & Gynecology** (OB-GYN) provides some primary care services around vaginal and uterine health. You will also need a general PCP for other health-related visits.



What does a primary care appointment look like?

When you arrive, you'll have to check-in, confirm your insurance information, and pay any co-pays. Generally, you'll meet with your PCP for about twenty minutes. The provider will come in and start with a physical exam to assess your health.

During this exam, the provider will:

-  Listen to your heart and lungs
-  Check your ears, eyes, nose, and throat
-  Examine your body for bumps, swelling, aches, or tenderness
-  Ask you questions about your health and wellness, such as your medical history, lifestyle habits, and current health conditions.

There may be some other tests depending on your age and assigned sex at birth. Older adults may have a cholesterol test. Your PCP may do a genital exam. If you have a uterus, you may have a pap smear; while if you have testes, you may have a prostate exam. After meeting with your PCP, you may be sent to the lab for some bloodwork. They'll collect some blood for routine tests of cholesterol levels, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), or a metabolic panel.

How does health insurance work with primary care?

Generally, health insurance will cover the costs of your annual wellness visit. This is also called a routine check-up. Otherwise, you may have some out-of-pocket costs called a co-payment for the visit. Make sure the PCP you see is in-network with your insurance.

If you are on the Columbia health insurance plan through Aetna, your PCP is a provider at Medical Services.



Levels of Medical Care

1.

Primary Care

Primary Care Doctors

- Regular Check-ups
- Routine tests & screenings
- Vaccinations
- Wellness & Sickness visits

2.

Secondary Care

Medical Specialists

- Focus on a specific body system or condition
- Diagnose issues
- Prescribe medications and treatments

3.

Tertiary Care

Advanced Specialists

- More intensive treatments or complex surgery often performed in a larger hospital

4.

Quaternary Care

- Highly specialized procedures
- Experimental medicine

Should I always start with my primary care provider?

They often serve as a first line of support for any medical-related concerns and can refer you out to additional providers – or specialists – as needed. Your insurance may require you to meet with your PCP first before being seen by a specialist for non-emergent medical issues.

If you are on the Columbia health insurance plan through Aetna, your PCP is a provider at Medical Services.

When should I not see my PCP?

While your PCP acts as your first point-of-contact around your health and medical needs, some situations may require a trip to urgent care centers or to an emergency room.

An **emergency room** is for life threatening situations that require immediate care. **Urgent care** is for issues that need to be addressed quickly but are often not life-threatening – like injuries, high fevers, infections, and other ailments.

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