

“When it comes to a patient’s health, the primary care physician is the **team captain**. The patient, specialists and family members are all part of the team, but I’m your health care advocate, and my goal is to preserve your quality of life, because once you have a heart attack or cancer, you’re quality of life will never be the same again.”

—Dr. Catherine McDoniel  
family medicine physician  
Palos Medical Group



## *Primary Care Physicians* and Why You Need One

**More than 82 percent of Americans had contact with a health care professional during the past year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). With stats like that, odds are good that within the next 365 days, you too will be paying a visit to the doctor, whether it’s via a scheduled appointment or emergency room visit. Isn’t it time you take control of the situation?**

Let’s face it: Most of us invest more time and energy researching a new SUV or home purchase than we do our health care. But when you consider the fact that only 50 percent of Americans own a car and 68 percent buy their own home, and neither are expected to last as long as the human body, perhaps it’s time to reconsider our priorities. And just as you wouldn’t want to entrust your car to the first tow-truck driver that passes you on the side of the road, the best time to start taking care of your health is before you get sick. The best place to start: with a doctor who specializes in keeping you from getting sick in the first place.

### **You Need a PCP**

“A primary care physician is a doctor who is going to be the organizer of your healthcare, a starting point,” says Catherine McDoniel, D.O., a board-certified family medicine physician who practices with Palos Medical Group, located at the Primary Care Center in Orland Park. “And when you require more specialized treatment, the primary care physician facilitates the process by recommending specialists and coordinating the care of those physicians. But most importantly, a primary care physician should be looking at ways to keep you healthy.”

A primary care physician, more commonly known as a PCP or family doctor, is a physician who is specifically trained in treating the entire person, physically, mentally and emotionally, explains the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) on its website. Unlike other doctors who specialize in treating one particular organ or disease, PCPs not only diagnose and treat acute and chronic illnesses, like the flu and high blood pressure, but they also provide routine health screenings and counseling on lifestyle changes in an effort to prevent diseases from developing in the first place.

Just like doctors who specialize in a specific part of the body or disease, primary care physicians train for three years, treating patients in real-life settings. Their education includes not only several major areas of medicine but also all patient populations, including infants and the elderly. According to the AAFP, PCPs undergo training in:

- Care for chronic conditions, such as diabetes, asthma and heart disease;
- Ear, nose and throat care;
- Emergency medical care;
- Minor surgical procedures;
- Mental and behavioral health care;
- Bone and joint care;
- Eye care;
- Care of the urinary systems; and
- Well-woman care, reproductive counseling and family planning.

In addition to providing routine screenings and treating the garden-variety cold and flu bugs, your PCP also can diagnose and manage minor allergies, perform routine gynecological exams and pap smears, set broken bones and detect arthritis, remove moles and treat rashes, help control diabetes and asthma, and even diagnose minor emotional problems like depression and anxiety.

Specialists are trained to treat more serious conditions, McDoniel says, so it can take longer to get an appointment and they may be more expensive. “Most of us are generally healthy for the majority of our lives. So if you’re a healthy

person and simply need routine care, a PCP is an excellent choice.”

## The Perfect Choice

One of the greatest advantages of having a primary care physician is the bond you’ll create over time. Research shows that people who have an ongoing relationship with a PCP have better overall health outcomes, lower death rates and lower total costs of health care.

“I am amazed every time I treat someone who doesn’t think they’re sick, and they feel so much better,” McDoniel says. “There are enumerable asymptomatic diseases — high blood pressure and cholesterol, even some cancers — that can persist for years without causing problems. The time, money and amount of medicine needed to treat high blood pressure are a lot less than it is to treat a heart attack.”

To find that perfect PCP, you’ll need to do some research. Not only should he or she be qualified and board-certified, but your personalities should match. Like any good relationship, communication is critical. You’ll need to feel comfortable explaining the intimate details of your physical and mental health, and in turn, the doctor will need to respond to your needs in a way that makes you feel cared for and understood, in addition to providing effective treatment.

With any prospective doctor, take the time to interview both the staff



and

the physician.

The top 10 questions to ask during a visit or phone interview include:

1. Is the doctor accepting new patients?
2. What insurance plans does the practice accept?
3. With which hospitals is the doctor affiliated?
4. What are the office hours, and who covers when the doctor is out of town?
5. How long does it take to get a routine appointment?
6. How quickly can I get an appointment if I have an emergency?
7. At what point can I cancel an appointment and not be charged a fee?
8. Will a doctor, nurse or physician’s assistant give advice over the phone or call in prescriptions without being seen?
9. Does the office send reminders for routine screenings, such as pap smears or annual exams?
10. What is the doctor’s philosophy of care, and how aggressive is he or she in ordering tests and prescribing medications?

If you need help finding the perfect physician to meet your needs, contact the Palos Community Hospital Physician Referral Service by calling (708) 226-2300 or visiting us on the web at [www.PalosCommunityHospital.org/doctor](http://www.PalosCommunityHospital.org/doctor).