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Finding Dr. Right

By Kristen Finello

Now's the perfect time to pick a doctor for your baby. Why so soon? She'll visit you in the hospital after baby arrives, and there will be lots of check-ups to follow. Plus, if you start now, you'll have plenty of time to research this important decision. Here's your step-by-step guide:

Step #1: Ask Around

WHO'S GOT THE SCOOP ON DOCTORS FOR YOUR BABY?

OTHER MOMS! Ask friends and neighbors about their children's doctors. Your ob-gyn is also a great source. "If she has kids, ask her who she sees," says Gwenn Schurgin O'Keeffe, MD, a pediatrician in Boston and chief editor of Pediatrics Now, a health information Web site. Other options: Ask a local children's hospital for recommendations or do a search on the American Academy of Pediatrics' Web site at www.aap.org (click on "Find a Pediatrician").

Step #2: Narrow the Field

Once you've compiled a list of names, narrow your search by considering these questions.

- **Where is the office?** Your best bet is usually near your house. "A mistake some parents make is choosing a pediatrician close to work rather than home," says Dr. O'Keeffe. "But if your child is sick, you're going to be home."
- **Does the doctor accept your insurance plan, and is he or she accepting new patients?** Calls to the doctor's office and your insurance company can get answers.
- **Is the doctor board-certified?** "This assures you that the doctor's training is excellent," says Andrew D. Racine, MD, PhD, director of the division of general pediatrics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine Children's Hospital at Montefiore in the Bronx, New York. To see if a doctor is board-certified, visit the American Board of Pediatrics' Web site at www.abp.org and click on "Is My Pediatrician Certified?"



Step #3: Set Up Interviews

After you've zeroed in on a few candidates, call their offices to schedule a prenatal interview. (Some offices charge for this visit, so be sure to ask.) Go to your appointment with a list of questions and consider the following issues:

- **Availability** How easy is it to get an appointment? What days and hours is the office open? Who answers questions when the office is closed? "Someone could be the best doctor in the world, but if you can't get a hold of him when your child is sick, that won't do you any good," says Dr. Racine.
- **Communication style** Do you feel comfortable talking to this

doctor? Does he really listen, or does he seem rushed?

- **Parenting/health philosophies** Discuss the doctor's position on issues such as feeding, discipline, and alternative medicine. Find out if she is open-minded to different opinions and willing to work with your religious and personal beliefs, says Dr. O'Keefe.
- **Group vs. solo practice** If you're considering a solo practitioner, be sure to ask who covers when your doctor is unavailable. With a group practice, know that someone will always be available but a sick child may be seen by someone other than his "regular" doctor.

"Ask the nurses who teach your childbirth class which doctors they would recommend for your baby. They're usually very familiar with the doctors in your area."

—SUSAN,
MOTHER OF ONE,
VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA

Step #4: Trust Yourself

In the end, the best indicator that you've found the right doctor for your baby is how comfortable you feel with him. "Like most things related to child-rearing, trusting your gut is important," says Dr. Racine. Often, seeing the doctor in action can reassure you of your decision. Michelle Grady of Plainview, New York, knew that her pediatrician was a keeper after her daughter's first ear infection. "I was really nervous," Grady remembers, "but not only did our doctor take the time to answer all of my questions, he also lightened the mood by pretending to pull a fish out of Madison's ear and telling her, 'The problem is that you had a fish in your ear!'" That combination of knowledge and kindness is clearly the mark of a doctor who will be a great partner as your baby grows.

Don't Forget!

In your search for a doctor for your baby, don't overlook these factors:

- **Condition of waiting room** It should be clean and outfitted with maintained toys and perhaps have a child-friendly DVD playing.
- **The staff's attitude** Are the nurses and office staff helpful and courteous? Are they kind to children?
- **Parking situation** Circling the block three times looking for a spot with a sick baby in the car is no fun.
- **Access to the office** Lots of stairs and a super-crowded waiting room can make a visit that much trickier.