

5 Questions to Ask About Your Doctor

The fragmented, uncoordinated American health care system today is a major cause of our rapidly increasing health care costs. It is also the reason why so many Americans are still receiving less-than-optimal care. Doctors and medical groups who strive to build their practices around the five principles described here are doctors who take responsibility for the cost and quality of the care they provide. They believe that team-based care and coordination results in better medical results for the patient.

In 2001, The Institute of Medicine made specific recommendations to the health care community about how to improve the care that Americans receive. Based on their recommendations, the American Medical Group Association's Council of Accountable Physician Practices (CAPP) put together this checklist to help patients understand what quality coordinated care can and should be in today's world.

There are many physician groups and organized delivery systems around the country that are working towards this goal of coordinated, quality care. Is your doctor's practice one of them?

1. Does your doctor or your doctor's staff actively coordinate (perhaps even schedule) appointments for all of your health services, such as the lab, X-rays, education, hospitalization, and specialist services?

If the answer is yes, then your doctor's medical group is striving to provide you with Coordinated Care. This is very good. Medical conditions often require a patient to see several doctors, specialists, lab technicians, therapists, and other care providers. All of these people need your medical information. They also need to talk to each other about your care to make sure that you are not subjected to unnecessary tests, medication errors, or costs that can occur when there is a lack of communication between them. You know your care is being well coordinated when:

- The specialists you see have easy access to your complete medical record—the same record that your general practice doctor or primary care physician refers to.
- Follow-up care such as health education classes, physical therapy, and tests is easy to get through your doctor's office.

- Your hospital care is coordinated with your doctor and your specialists. All care providers know when you are being discharged, what your discharge instructions are, and follow up with you.
- You don't have to repeat yourself or keep track of your own medications, test results, or X-rays, and you feel that everyone caring for you is informed about who you are, the care you have received, and what you need next.

2. Does your doctor routinely recommend preventive care to you and provide you with 24-hour access to health information and medical advice?

If the answer is yes, you know your doctor and the medical group believes in a patient-centered approach to care. If your doctor's practice encourages preventive care and provides you access to care day and night, you know their goal is to keep you healthy. Here are a few other things to look for:

- Your physician or other health care providers in his practice listen well and make inquiries about your lifestyle to determine what might have an affect on your health.
- Your doctor provides you with health education information, health classes, and clear treatment instructions.
- Other health care services, such as X-ray and imaging, lab, specialty, or education services are co-located with your doctor's office or conveniently located nearby.
- Your doctor's medical group has a web site from which you can access such services as making appointments, getting lab information, health education information, etc.

3. Is there is good teamwork, communication, and information sharing between your primary care doctor, specialists, and supporting staff?

If the answer is yes, then your doctor's practice believes in a team approach to healthcare. This type of care-team structure is generally found in a medical group where primary care physicians and their staff—in partnership with a variety of specialists—work together to provide coordinated care to the group's patients. You know this is the case when:

- Your doctor can consult with a community of doctors in the practice about major medical decisions to ensure that judgments are sound and that all treatment options are considered.
- There are other doctors, nurse practitioners (NPs), or physician's assistants (PAs) who can step in to care for you when your doctor is not available, and they have easy access to all of your medical records and history (ideally through an electronic medical record or EMR).
- You feel that there is good communication going on between all of the people who care for you about your condition. You don't have to repeat information to keep all your care providers informed!

4. Does your doctor seem well-informed about new treatments for your condition and is able to help you evaluate the pros and cons of your medical options?

If the answer is yes, then your doctor probably has the support of his medical group to stay on top of advancements in medical science. Health care treatments change rapidly, so keeping abreast of latest scientific research is very hard to do for the busy doctor who practices alone or in a small group. There is simply too much information to be researched and absorbed by any one person.

So if your doctor is aware of new treatments and drugs for your condition, and can talk knowledgeably with you about them, you know your doctor has the support and training of his medical group. And you know the medical group is continuously assessing the skills of their doctors and staff when you are asked for feedback (usually through a survey) about the care and services you receive. Clinicians who are held accountable for the quality of care they provide are motivated to continually improve their skills.

5. Does your doctor make use of health information technology (including electronic medical records) to share your medical information with the specialists that you also see?

If your answer is yes, then your doctor works in a medical organization that is striving to achieve better coordination of care for you. Medical practices that use information technologies, such as an electronic medical record and robust, interactive websites have made this investment because they know that sharing information among all care providers results in better care and treatment. Advanced health information technology allows your doctor and medical staff to:

- Communicate and transmit information about you and your care easily to one another.
- Have all the correct information about your care (medications, last visit information, lab results, etc.) without you having to provide it.
- Have complete information about the care and treatment that you receive outside of the doctor's office, such as in the emergency room, urgent care visits, after-hours calls for care, physical therapy, health education, etc.
- Check for drug interactions.
- Get alerts about when you should receive a follow-up treatment.
- Get information about the latest in medical advancements
- Get information about your insurance benefits so that your doctor can work with you to get the best care for you using your health insurance benefits.
- Have access to patient medical records either from their home or after-hours.
- Make your test and lab information easily and readily available to patients on-line.