

How to Choose a Pediatrician and Hospital for Your Family



It's important to choose carefully when you are considering which doctor will care for your children. You will certainly see a great deal of this physician over the years, as your child grows from babyhood to adolescence. You will need to feel comfortable discussing anything. You will need to know you can trust your pediatrician to help you make the right decisions—on day-to-day matters and in emergencies. It's important to be confident your pediatrician is affiliated with the right sort of hospital—one that provides specialized care for pediatric patients throughout the hospital, including the emergency department. The right health-care provider will be a trusted ally in the challenging and occasionally tumultuous—though always rewarding—job of raising your children.

When Do I Start?

Before. Before you have a baby, move to a new community, or change physicians, you can start looking for a pediatrician. Get referrals—from other doctors, from friends, neighbors, or even from a hospital near your home. From these sources, you'll create a list of names. The next step is to check which of these doctors are covered on your health insurance. Once you've created a shorter list, you can begin your investigation.

How Do I Begin?

Pediatricians recognize that you are making a big decision in choosing who will be taking care of your children. Most practices are willing to set up an appointment for an interview. Some may charge for the visit, others will not—but it is an important part of choosing a doctor. From a group session or even a brief encounter, you can learn much about who this doctor is, his or her philosophies, how the practice operates, and whether you and your children will feel comfortable there.

Once You Get There

Be prepared for your visit with a potential doctor. Arrive early so you can spend some time in the waiting room. Observe what is around you. Kids who have fevers or acute illnesses should be shown to a separate waiting room—or at least a segregated area for sick children. Note whether there are age-appropriate toys and reading materials in the waiting area. Is the waiting room clean? Expect that an office that caters to children might be busy and cluttered, but it should not be dirty.

By arriving early, you can also see how the office staff treats you and others who arrive for appointments. Are they friendly and efficient? Do they seem to have a good rapport with patients and parents? Are children themselves greeted and made to feel at ease? Ask parents who are waiting what their experience with the practice has been like. Is the atmosphere chaotic, or does it seem organized and under control?

You will want to ask about how billing, insurance, and payment are handled. Find out how the practice handles questions—by telephone or email—and if there is a charge. Review the office hours. If you are a working parent, you may appreciate a pediatric practice that has evening or weekend hours. You may find that some practices have a special hour each morning for walk-ins, or a weekend clinic. While these topics may make you uncomfortable, they are a reality of dealing with a doctor's office, and you should know in advance what will be expected of you—and what services the office can provide for you. How respectfully your questions are answered is also an indication of how the staff handles these logistical matters.

The Doctor Will See You Now...

It is a good idea to bring along a list of questions to review when you actually sit down to meet with a prospective pediatrician. Here are some suggestions.

What is your background?

A pediatrician should have graduated from a four-year medical school with three additional years of residency training in pediatrics. Board certification in pediatrics is further recognition of expertise.

Do you have a subspecialty?

Some doctors have additional training from the American Board of Pediatrics, or in cardiology or particular diseases. This denotes a special interest and makes them more qualified in one particular area.

What is your check-up and immunization schedule?

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends check-ups shortly after discharge, and then for babies aged two weeks, two, four, six, nine, 12, 15, 18, and 24 months. After that you should plan on an annual physical for your child. If the doctor's schedule is different from that, you may ask why. The immunization schedule should also follow the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommended schedule. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics has an informative website found at www.aap.org that you may wish to visit.

Does your doctor or anyone else in the office speak another language?

If your first language is English, this may not be important to you. But if you or someone you love has English as a second language or you have a child-care provider from another country, it may be helpful to have someone on hand who understands the language.



With what type of parents do you work best?

Does he or she enjoy working with parents who ask a lot of questions? Does she prefer parents who follow directions without raising objections? Does he like parents who are chatty? Does she prefer parents who come to appointments with questions written down? These questions may help clarify for you how well you and this doctor would work together. Most importantly, you need to feel that you can communicate well with your pediatrician—that you are listened to and leave each visit feeling good about your care for your child.

Will you discuss behavioral and developmental issues at each visit?

This is an important aspect of a pediatrician's role, so hopefully the answer to this question will be yes. But listen to hear how much enthusiasm the doctor brings to this important topic.

How do you support breastfeeding?

Some doctors have people on staff who are trained lactation consultants. Others make referrals. Some support breastfeeding wholeheartedly while others are more neutral. This question will help you assess your doctor's attitude toward breastfeeding and whether it matches your own.



How do you feel about weaning?

If breastfeeding your child until a certain age is important to you, it would be a good idea to check in with the pediatrician about his or her philosophy on this topic.

What are your philosophies on the family bed, circumcision, discipline, and nutrition?

Of course, you need to know how you feel about these matters as well. This may seem like a long list of questions to tackle, but the idea is to see how the doctor's parenting philosophies line up with your own. So you may want to pick one or two topics that are important to you to use as a barometer with the doctor. Are your styles aligned? Do you feel your point of view is respected?

Once you know you have a competent pediatrician who will take the time to hear you and answer your questions, you will feel empowered as a parent. Finding a pediatrician who appreciates that there are many styles of parenting will mean you have found a valuable ally and resource, and your visits will feel less like an obligation and more like a place where you'll find comfort and support for well or sick visits.

Do you use physicians' assistants or nurse practitioners in your practice? How?

Some doctors use these medical assistants (who usually have graduate degrees in their fields) to handle routine physical exams, tests for strep infection, or other simple office visits.

What about after-hour care and emergencies?

Children often get sick when doctors' offices are closed. How does this doctor handle problems that arise at 10 pm or 2 am?

How do you handle emergencies?

Since raising a child can be fraught with the unexpected, it's good to hear exactly how this doctor and his or her office attend to emergencies. Is there a special phone number to call? Is there a chance you'll see someone other than your doctor for an emergency?

What about minor questions?

Sometimes a parent needs advice—not necessarily a whole doctor's visit, but just some information and good answers. How does the office handle these "minor" questions? If the doctor can't speak to you, who will? Does the office designate a time to call with questions? Do they answer emails? Is there a charge for this service?

Who covers for you when you are not available?

No doctor works 365 days a year, so you'll want to know who will be taking care of your child when the doctor is on vacation or is ill. If it's someone else in the group practice, ask if you can meet the other doctors, just to see if you feel comfortable with them.

What is your hospital affiliation?

This is an important question, because if you have an emergency with your child, you'll want to have your child admitted to a hospital where your regular pediatrician has privileges.

Choosing a Hospital

Even if it is just an occasional visit to the emergency room, few families raise children to adulthood without having a trip or two to the hospital. It is important to feel confident in the healthcare facility where your child will be taken in an emergency and cared for if he or she is ill. Stamford Hospital is a well-regarded hospital with up-to-date facilities, well-trained physicians and support staff, and expertise in providing the specialized medical care that pediatric patients need.

Is the hospital conveniently located?

It doesn't have to be within a two-mile radius, but your hospital of choice should be located within what you consider to be a reasonable driving distance from your home.

Is there a good emergency department?

It's impossible to know going into parenthood what sorts of emergencies you are likely to encounter—but you can rest assured that you will encounter a few, at least. Children fall off swings and bicycles, run high fevers, develop allergies—and as a parent, you should feel confident that your local emergency room will handle your medical situation competently, correctly, and respectfully. You will want to know that the facility is clean and up to date, whether there is adequate privacy, and if people are seen quickly. Depending on the nature of the illness or injury, it may also be important that children are seen by physicians with specialized pediatric training. Stamford Hospital is unique in lower Fairfield County in having pediatricians on duty, in the hospital, at all hours of the day and night.

Is there a pediatric specialist in the emergency department?

Infants and children are not small adults. They have a unique physiology; a predictable pattern of growth and development that may affect diagnosis or mean that an illness needs to be interpreted in the context of age; a host of illnesses and injuries they are particularly vulnerable to; and significant psychosocial needs. That's why it is important that doctors caring for young children are highly trained in the practice of pediatric medicine—whether the patient is a newborn, a preschooler having an asthma attack, or a child with a broken leg. Not only does Stamford Hospital have pediatricians always in the hospital and instantly available, but there is also an emergency specialist who provides ongoing education and training to staff nurses and physicians on treating children in the urgent care setting.

Is there an "Urgent Care" center or a walk-in facility for minor emergencies?

Emergency rooms can be scary places, especially because the medical professionals there are involved in life-and-death situations. Some hospitals—including Stamford Hospital—also operate separate facilities that provide urgent care for less severe emergencies. Stamford Hospital's Immediate Care Center, located at the Tully Health Center, is open 365 days a year (Monday–Friday: 8 am–8 pm, weekends and holidays: 8 am–6 pm) and is appropriate for a wide range of medical situations that are non-life-threatening.

If my child has to be hospitalized, who will be in charge of his or her care?

Most hospitals have local pediatricians rotate an "on-call" schedule, meaning they come into the hospital when a child requires emergency care. Unlike any other hospital in the area, Stamford Hospital employs a cadre of five specialized pediatric physicians, called "pediatric hospitalists," so that at least one is always in the building and immediately available. Stamford Hospital is committed to maintaining in-house coverage all hours of the day and night, every day of the year.

Does that mean my pediatrician won't be involved in my child's care if he or she has to be in the hospital?

The pediatrician you choose will certainly continue to oversee your child's medical care while hospitalized, but during the daytime hours he or she will be working in the office setting, and at night will likely be at home. Stamford Hospital's pediatric hospitalists work closely with each patient's private pediatrician to make sure your child receives consistent care, and to keep the physician apprised of progress and any sudden changes in condition.

Does the hospital have pediatric subspecialists on staff?

If your child has a specialized medical condition, requiring occasional or regular care from a pediatric subspecialist, you'll want to know that you don't have to travel out of town to receive the excellent care your child deserves. Stamford Hospital has on-staff pediatric subspecialists—pediatricians who have completed additional years of training in a medical subspecialty—in the areas of cardiology, urology, gastroenterology, neurology, pulmonology, orthopedics, ophthalmology, and more. These pediatric subspecialists work in collaboration with your child's pediatrician to provide specialized care appropriate to your child's medical needs right in our community. They will also visit your child during a hospitalization, if needed.

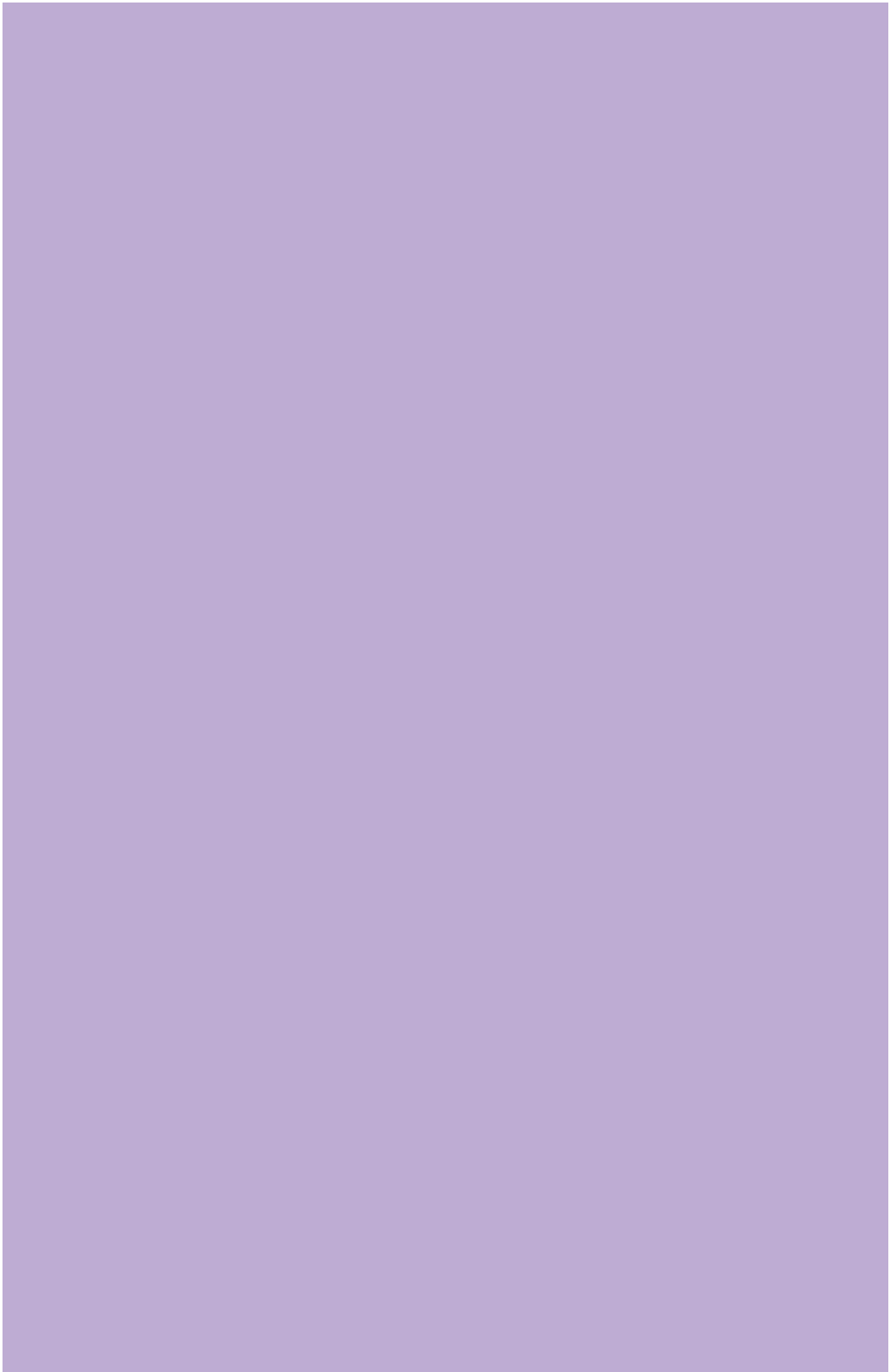




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In Summary ...

Choosing a doctor and a hospital is a giant step in the care of your baby or child. But if you approach these decisions armed with the right questions and a framework for reviewing the information at hand, you'll feel more confident in your choice. At Stamford Hospital, there are many fine pediatricians affiliated with our facility. They are here to serve you and your family. The hospital is pleased and proud of our affiliation with each and every one of them.





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