



# LET'S TALK ABOUT PRIMARY CARE

ERIE COUNTY OFFICE OF HEALTH EQUITY

Finding the right primary care provider can take time and effort. You may have to try a few providers before you find one that works for you. Your health is personal, and trust takes time to build. When you have a provider who listens, understands, and supports you, you'll have a partner in your health journey for a long time. With regular visits, your primary care provider can help:

- Prevent problems before they start
- Manage existing or ongoing problems
- Keep track of your overall health
- Avoid time spent in the hospital

## WHAT IS PRIMARY CARE?

Your primary care provider is your medical home. This is where you will receive credible or trustworthy information and professional advice



about how to maintain your health and prevent illness. Your primary care provider is trained to recognize possible health concerns even when you feel healthy and well. It is important to visit your primary care provider at least once per year, even if you feel well. This gives your provider the chance to identify any potential problems early on. Primary care is also called family medicine, general practice (GP), or internal medicine. Primary care focuses on:

- **Wellness**, or your overall health, is affected by choices you can make about what you eat, how you move your body, and other habits.
- **Preventive medicine** focuses on what you and your provider can do to keep an illness, disability, or early death from happening. Your provider will discuss things like vaccines, testing for diseases, and regular check-ups. The goal is to identify risk factors, notice early signs and symptoms, and promote healthy choices to avoid future illnesses.
- **Chronic care management** refers to all the ways your provider can watch and treat long-lasting conditions. It is normal for your provider to ask to see you in their office more than once a year when you are watching or working to improve a chronic health condition. Your provider may also want you to get testing done such as blood work or imaging, also called x-rays or scans.



Erie County  
Department of  
Health



OFFICE OF HEALTH EQUITY  
[www.erie.gov/health-equity](http://www.erie.gov/health-equity)

ENGLISH

# **TYPES OF PRIMARY CARE**

A **primary care provider** is a medical professional who helps you manage your health. Many providers will use the term “**practice**” to mean the place where providers offer care. A **clinic** is type of practice that typically offers more than one type of care. **You may choose more than one primary care provider to meet your unique health care needs.**

Doctors who provide primary care typically have the letters “MD” (Medical Doctor) or “DO” (Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine) after their names. These are both types of medical doctors who can diagnose, treat, and prescribe medication. Doctors can also be called a physician or “GP” (general physician).

## **PEDIATRICIAN**

Provider who see infants, children, and young adults.

## **FAMILY MEDICINE**

Provider who sees patients of all ages.

## **INTERNIST**

Provider who sees adults.

## **OB/GYN: OBSTETRICIAN/GYNECOLOGIST**

Provider who specializes in pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum (after birth), and reproductive health.

## **GERIATRICIAN OR GERIATRIC DOCTOR**

Provider who focuses on the health of older adults.

## **OTHER TYPES OF PROVIDERS**

A primary care provider is a medical professional who helps you manage your health. They are not always a medical doctor. It is common for patients to see a PA or NP for the majority of a doctor’s appointment and visit with the MD or DO only briefly or occasionally.

## **PA: PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT AND NP: NURSE PRACTITIONER**

A PA or NP can diagnose, treat, and prescribe medication under the guidance of a doctor.

## **ARE PAs and NPs NURSES or DOCTORS?**

An NP is a nurse who has had more advanced education and training. NPs and PAs are not doctors, but they have been trained and are licensed to provide medical care.

## **HEALTH INSURANCE**

A health insurance plan can reduce the cost of doctors visits, tests, procedures, medicine, and other bills that can come up due to an accident or illness. You or your child may be eligible for free or lower cost health insurance.

To get health insurance, you can:

- Ask your employer about health insurance benefits
- Call 211 WNY by dialing 2-1-1 or texting your ZIP code to 898211
- Visit [nystateofhealth.ny.gov](http://nystateofhealth.ny.gov) to see what plans you qualify for. See tip below.
- Call Erie County Department of Social Services at (716) 858-8000 or visit <https://www3.erie.gov/socialservices/medicaid-program>

**TIP:** Search for “Find local help” on the NY State of Health website to access assistors offering FREE help exploring plans and enrolling in health insurance, including Child Health Plus. Assistance is available in multiple languages and on evenings and weekends.



# CHOOSING A PROVIDER

There are many ways to find a health care provider.



**Search online.** Many websites will provide contact information and reviews. Search "find a primary care provider near me" in any internet browser to search for providers close to your location.



**Ask your health insurance company.** Insurance providers have an online tool or a phone number you can call to discuss your options.



**Ask your community.** People you trust and groups you are a part of may have a great recommendation. Use the guide below to know what questions to ask.



**Your local hospital can help you find a health care provider.** Some hospitals even have their own primary care clinics.

Here are some things to consider when choosing a provider:

- **Skills.** If you have a chronic illness, like diabetes, or are experiencing a big change in your life, like menopause, look for a provider that specializes in that area.
- **Needs.** Some providers are multilingual, specialize in treating immigrant or LGBTQIA+ communities, or provide additional services within their practice such as social workers or mental health care. You may want to look for a provider you feel culturally connected to, or you may prefer a particular age range, gender, race, or ethnicity.
- **Location.** Find a provider that you can get to. Some providers are on public transit routes. Some providers may only have street parking. Medicaid, your insurance company, or organizations for older adults may be able to help you get to your appointment.
- **Hours.** Look for an office with hours and locations that meet your schedule and travel needs. Some offices have evening and weekend hours. Others offer live support online when offices are closed.
- **Dignity.** Finding a provider you can trust and who respects your choices is important.
- **Fit.** Think about your experience after your first visit. If it was not a good fit, you can choose to find a different provider.

**Changing providers can be stressful, but it is important to have a provider who listens to you and understands you.**

## RESPECT & DIGNITY ARE KEY

### REMEMBER: YOUR PROVIDER WORKS FOR YOU

It is okay to ask your provider about their understanding of your culture, race, or ethnicity. This will help them understand what is important in your care. Here are 3 questions to ask:

- 1 Have you treated people like me or received training in cultural competence?
- 2 How do you see our different cultural backgrounds impacting communication and my treatment?
- 3 What is your understanding of differences in health outcomes for patients like me?

Sometimes providers explain medical terms in a way that does not make sense to you. It is okay to ask questions. It is your provider's job to explain things in a way that you understand.

You hired your provider to help you manage your health and wellness. You are in charge. **Trust is an important part of your relationship with your provider.** If you feel that your provider does not believe or respect you, you have the right to find a provider who does.



**Find lower cost primary care, behavioral health & dental care at a health care center near you. Visit [www.snapcapwny.org/#safety](http://www.snapcapwny.org/#safety).**

# TYPES OF VISITS

## PREVENTIVE CARE VISITS



- Your **annual wellness visit** includes a physical exam and may also include vaccinations and lab tests. Your provider will check your general health by listening to your heart and lungs, looking at your nose and mouth, and more. Your provider can track changes over time and make recommendations based on the information you share during your visit.
- **Vaccinations** or **immunizations** like the flu shot help prevent illness by teaching your body's immune system how to defend itself against germs.
- **Screening lab tests** are usually ordered by your provider before your annual wellness visit. "Physical labs" refers to a collection of lab tests that is recommended each year. The lab collects samples of your blood, urine, and other body fluids to test for information about your health.
- **Preventive care screens** are tests designed to detect health concerns early on. These screens look for things like cancer, potential risks for falls, mental health changes, and more.



Most insurance plans cover or pay for preventive care measures like your annual wellness visit and cancer screenings. Be sure to check with your insurance company to find out which preventive care measures are covered under your plan.

Services and visits that are not considered preventive care may require you to pay a **copay or co-payment** for the service provided. This means you will need to pay a fee at the time of the visit. Check with your insurance plan to see what your copay will be.

## ROUTINE CHECKUPS & CHRONIC CARE VISITS

- **Diagnostic tests** are exams, procedures, or assessments that help your provider determine if a disease or medical condition is present, how serious it is, and (sometimes) what caused it. One common diagnostic test is a biopsy. A **biopsy** is a laboratory test that examines a sample of tissue or fluid from your body for disease.
- If you have been diagnosed with a chronic medical issue, your provider will ask you to visit on a regular basis in order to manage the problem, watch for any changes, and make recommendations about what you can do to manage and improve your health.

## ACUTE CARE VISITS

- **Sick visits** focus on a specific health concern like a sore throat or broken finger.
- Emergency room (ER) or hospital follow-up visits are a form of acute care visit called **transitions of care**. These visits occur after an ER or hospital stay. These visits are an opportunity for you to ask questions about instructions from the hospital and for your provider to make sure you understand these instructions and are taking any new medications correctly.

## YOU KNOW YOUR BODY BEST

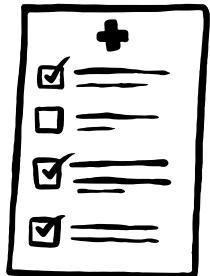
→ Tell your provider if you think something is wrong.

If you do not think your provider is listening to you when you share signs and symptoms, tell your doctor that you feel this way. If they still will not listen, you may need to find a new doctor. If you feel as though you are being treated unfairly, report your doctor to your health insurance provider. Changing providers can be stressful but it is important to have a provider who listens to you and understands you.



# PREPARING FOR YOUR VISIT

Before you see your provider, write a list of any signs (visible changes in your health) or symptoms (conditions you may feel or notice but that others might not see) you may have noticed. Bring your list of concerns and questions with you to your visit. If you are open and honest with your doctor, you may be able to learn about a condition or disease before it becomes very serious. Finding a disease in its early stages give you more treatment options and better outcomes. Your provider will order tests based on your signs and symptoms. These can include blood tests, x-rays, and more.



## WHAT TO EXPECT AT YOUR VISIT

- **A physical exam** to check your overall health at least once a year. Your provider will:
  - Check how well your organs are working
  - Check your eyes, ears, skin, heart, lungs, and more
  - Offer to update vaccinations
  - Review any lab tests you completed before your exam
- **A review of your medical history**, including any surgeries and conditions you have had in the past. Understanding your medical history helps your provider see the full picture of your health and create a treatment plan tailored to your specific medical needs.
- **A review of your family medical history** (conditions of people related to you). This is important because some diseases and conditions run in families. This information adds to the overall picture of your health. If your provider knows your family medical history, they can make more specific recommendations to help you stay healthy.

## TIPS

- **Bring a list of questions** you may have so you don't forget them in the moment.
- **Bring a list of all the prescriptions**, over-the-counter medicines, and vitamins you take.
- **Bring a friend or family member** if you are concerned you might not remember or understand what your provider tells you.
  - You can also ask your provider if you can record the visit on your phone.
- **Take notes** to help you remember what your provider says.
- **Ask your provider to speak slowly, use simple language, and explain** anything you did not understand.
  - Repeat what they have said back to them. Try saying, "I am hearing you say: \_\_\_\_\_ . Did I get that right?"
- **Request a printed copy of any test orders**. Many provider offices will tell you they are sending lab or x-ray orders directly to the lab or x-ray facility. Sometimes the script does not make it there, causing you to have to reschedule your appointment. A printed copy of the test order could save you time.

# AFFIRMING CARE

**Affirming care** refers to a range of services that carefully consider and respect your physical, mental, and spiritual health. **Everyone deserves affirming care**. Some types of affirming care include **gender-affirming care**, which recognizes an individual's gender identity and **palliative care**, which focuses on providing relief from symptoms of serious illnesses and improving quality of life. If you are not receiving the respect you deserve, you can let your provider know or report your feedback to your health insurance company. Changing providers can be stressful, but it is important to have a provider who listens, understands you, and supports your individual needs.



# GETTING TO YOUR APPOINTMENT



Once you schedule your appointment, it is time to plan how to get there. It can be difficult to find transportation, but there are options that may work for you. The NFTA website has information on routes that may work for you. Both Google and Apple maps will help you navigate public transportation using the bus and transit schedules. You can also ask a friend or family member for a ride if you do not have access to a car or driver's license. Some community centers and health clinics may offer transportation for those in need. If you have Medicaid, you may be eligible for non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT). Ask your provider or call Medicaid for more information.

Some cities, towns, and villages in Erie County have their own transportation services for older adults. Check to see if you qualify for transportation services. The Erie County Department for the Aging has a list of transportation services. Visit <https://www3.erie.gov/aging/transportation> or call (716) 858-8526.



## CARRY A LIST OF ALL YOUR DIAGNOSES & MEDICATIONS WITH YOU AT ALL TIMES

Ask your PROVIDER for a medicine wallet card or a printout from your patient portal.

# GETTING YOUR MEDICATION

A **prescription** or **script** is a written direction from a licensed health care provider that tells your pharmacy what medication you need. The script includes instructions from your provider like how much and how often you are supposed to take your medication. You used to receive a paper copy of your script, but most prescriptions are sent electronically now, and sometimes called "e-scripts."

If you have health insurance, call the member services phone number on your health insurance card to find out which pharmacies you can use. You can also ask about **mail-order or mail-away pharmacy** options. Mail-order pharmacies send your medication directly to your home address, making refills convenient. Some mail-order pharmacies offer pill packaging that will help you organize your medications by the time of day you need to take them. Be sure to let your health care provider know which pharmacy to send your prescriptions to.



To find a pharmacy near you and learn time-saving tips, visit  
<https://www3.erie.gov/health/pharmacies-and-prescriptions>.



### Ask your health care provider:

- Can you prescribe a 90-day supply?
  - If you take a medication for conditions like blood pressure, diabetes, or asthma, ask about a 90-day supply. This can help with fewer trips to the pharmacy and could mean fewer copayments.
- Do you have samples of this medication?
  - Some pharmaceutical companies give medication samples to health care providers. Your provider may have samples or promotional coupons.

### Ask your pharmacist:

- Do you deliver?
  - Some pharmacies will deliver medications to your home. Some pharmacies have a drive-thru window or curbside pick-up or so you do not have to get out of the car.
  - These programs often require you to keep a credit or debit card on file for payments and may also require you to show photo identification.
- Do you make pill packs?
  - If you take several medications, there may be an option to have the pharmacy sort your medications into individual packets. Each packet is labeled with the day and time you are supposed to take the medication.

# PATIENT PORTAL

Many health care providers have a portal or website where you view your health information. Your provider will help you create an account with a secure username and password to use when you log into the website. There you can find test results, ask questions, and request appointments. Ask your provider about patient portal access. **Ask for help if you are not sure how to use your portal website. Say, “I need help learning how to use the patient portal.”**



## In your patient portal, you can:

- Send and receive messages about symptoms, medication, and appointments
- View your list of medications
- Update your medical history
- View test results and appointment summaries
- Request an appointment
- See upcoming scheduled appointments

## HEALTH LITERACY

**Health literacy** refers to how well people find, understand, and use information and services like the patient portal to make health decisions.

Erie County librarians can help you increase your health literacy and teach you how to use websites like your patient portal. Some libraries hold digital skills classes, others can assist you directly. Ask your local librarian for more information. Visit <https://www.buffalolib.org> for programs and event information. Contact Literacy Buffalo-Niagara to learn more about their Digi-Skills program. Call 716-876-8997.

# REQUESTING MEDICAL RECORDS

You have a right to see your own health records. New York State Law requires all health care practitioners and facilities to allow patients to have access to their health records. You can make a request to have your medical records sent to specialists or to a new primary care provider. You can also request these records to keep for yourself. If you prefer a physical printout that you can take with you, ask for a **hard copy** of your records.



Records requests must be made in writing. Ask your provider if they have a form to complete or if you can just write a short letter requesting your records. This can be as simple as writing, “*I would like a hard copy of my medical records,*” with your name, birthdate, and address included.

New York State Law allows health care facilities to charge up to \$0.75 per page, plus the cost of postage to provide medical records. The same law protects you from being denied access to your records if you are unable to pay that fee. If you cannot afford the fee say, “*I cannot afford the printing costs for my medical records.*”



For answers to frequently asked questions about accessing your medical records in New York State, visit <https://www.health.ny.gov/publications/1443>

# SEARCHING FOR HEALTH INFORMATION ONLINE

Finding reliable and factual information online about public health can be difficult. There are many websites and social media accounts that look and feel professional, even when they are not. When searching for health information online, look for local government agencies (like your local health department), reputable medical institutions (like well-known medical schools such as University at Buffalo or Johns Hopkins University), professional medical associations (like the American Academy of Pediatrics), or ask your local librarian for help. Use these tips to detect false information:

- Check the source: Look for credentials, qualifications, skills, training, or knowledge. Think about whether the person sharing the information will make money off of what they are claiming, if you choose to believe it.
- Look for evidence: Reliable and factual information is based on significant scientific studies and clinical research, not recommendations or claims from social media influencers.
- Verify the date and source: Health information can become outdated quickly. Quality public health information is updated at least yearly and credible messengers are always willing to share their sources.
- Be skeptical: Things that sound too good to be true often are.
- Ask your provider: If you are seeking a treatment plan or prescription choice, ask for information or studies that show the plan or product works well for people like you.

 Visit [www.erie.gov/health](http://www.erie.gov/health) for reliable and factual public health information.

**The Erie County Department of Health** shares important public health information on Erie County's website and on social media. Visit [www.erie.gov/health](http://www.erie.gov/health), follow @ecdoh on Facebook, or follow @eriecohealth on Instagram to find out about local health programs, learn more about chronic illness and important health topics, find nearby clinics and services, and more.

**The Erie County Office of Health Equity** publishes information about the social determinants of health, or factors that influence your health. You can subscribe to receive these publications and other important health equity information in your inbox. For more information, visit [erie.gov/health-equity](http://erie.gov/health-equity).



These publications are available for download in  Arabic, Bengali, Burmese, English, Spanish, and Swahili.



**THIS IS A PUBLICATION OF THE  
ERIE COUNTY OFFICE OF HEALTH EQUITY**

This publication is available in 5 additional languages.



The Erie County Office of Health Equity's vision is for everyone in Erie County to achieve maximum health and wellness. The Office of Health Equity is located within the Erie County Department of Health.

**Want to learn more?**

Visit [www.erie.gov/health-equity](http://www.erie.gov/health-equity)  
Email us at [HealthEquity@erie.gov](mailto:HealthEquity@erie.gov)



Erie County  
Department of  
Health



**OFFICE OF HEALTH EQUITY**  
[www.erie.gov/health-equity](http://www.erie.gov/health-equity)