

[CN]Chapter 3

[CT]Getting the Right Doctors

[IP]A good doctor isn't always easy to find. Finding a good thyroid doctor can be even more challenging. But a skilled physician is going to be extremely important to someone with thyroid disease, especially since many of these conditions involve lifelong management. In this chapter, we'll help you weed out the good docs from the bad docs.

[H1]Choosing a Thyroid Doctor

[NF]Chances are, if you're like most people, the first doctor you'll see is your primary care doctor. You might go in complaining of fatigue and weight gain, or you may go in after you've noticed a bump in your neck. Or you may be on a routine physical exam when your doctor detects an abnormal lump in your thyroid. In any case, your primary care doctor is often your first stop on the way to diagnosing and treating your thyroid troubles.

Some cases of thyroid disease go no further than your primary care doctor, who may be perfectly qualified to detect the source of your

thyroid problems. Some primary care doctors are suitably qualified to treat an under or over active thyroid. These doctors are often internists, who specialize in internal medicine; family practitioners, physicians who treat families; or general practitioners.

Some people have as their care primary care doctor, an osteopathic physician (D.O.). Osteopathic doctors are trained just like medical doctors, and are able to prescribe medications and perform X-rays. What makes DOs different from MDs is that their training emphasizes viewing the body as an integrated whole.

[E-Question]

[SBQ]What is a thyroidologist?

[SB]It's arguable whether the term thyroidologist is real. There is no board certification to be a thyroidologist, only for endocrinologists. But doctors who call themselves thyroidologists specialize in disorders of the thyroid. Endocrinologists can treat the entire endocrine system, but may specialize in one aspect of it. If your primary doctor suspects you have a more serious thyroid

problem, she may feel more comfortable sending you to a specialist, usually an endocrinologist.

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[H2]Meet Your Endocrinologist

Endocrinologists specialize in the treatment and care of hormone disorders, such as thyroid disease, reproductive disorders, and diabetes. For many people with thyroid disease, an endocrinologist is their primary care doctor – the first one they call when something goes wrong with a new drug or when they feel symptoms.

Becoming an endocrinologist requires rigorous medical training. After four years of medical school, an endocrinologist must spend three or four years in an internship and residency program. Beyond that, they devote another two or three years focusing exclusively on hormonal disorders before becoming board certified in endocrinology. Many endocrinologists are fellows of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, a membership that is signified by the initials F.A.C.E. However, not all

endocrinologists are knowledgeable in thyroid disease. Rather, they may specialize in diabetes, lipid disorders, or reproductive endocrinology.

Many academic endocrinologists are members of the Endocrine Society, the professional arm of The Hormone Foundation. This prestigious organization hosts yearly meetings that expose endocrinologists to the latest research. A list of members can be found on the Internet at <http://www.endo-society.org/apps/FindAnEndo/index.cfm>.

Certain people with thyroid disease are more apt to need the services of an endocrinologist than others. These include people who have:

[BL]Mild hypothyroidism

[BL]Hypothyroidism due to a pituitary disorder

[BL]Graves' disease

[BL]Thyroid nodules

[BL]Thyroid cancer

[BL]A condition that requires thyroid surgery

Others may simply prefer to see an endocrinologist if they develop thyroid disease. After all, an endocrinologist is generally more familiar with disorders involving the hormones than most other physicians.

If you want or need to see an endocrinologist, you can probably ask your primary care doctor for a referral. But you may also want to ask friends, family members, and other people with thyroid disease for referrals. You can also look for an endocrinologist on the Internet or in chat rooms about thyroid disease. Many doctors now have their own Web site and frequently communicate with patients by email.

Ideally, you'll find a good doctor you genuinely like since thyroid problems can last a lifetime and will require lifelong maintenance.

[H2]What Makes a Good Endocrinologist

Not all doctors are created equal. Some may be technically competent but lack the people skills that prompt patients to open up about embarrassing but important symptoms. Others may be great communicators, but neglect to stay on top of the latest

developments in endocrine research. When it comes to finding the best endocrinologist to treat your thyroid disease, you want one who has the best of both – a doctor who is both skilled and compassionate, namely someone you can trust.

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| [SB] Got a doctor you love? Nominate him on Mary [J. Shomon's](#) Web site, [www.thyroid.about.com's](http://www.thyroid.about.com), and go to the Thyroid Top Doc Directory. The site allows you to click on a state, and read what other patients have to say about their doctors. It also gives the top doc's address, phone number, and email address.

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It isn't always easy to find someone who meets those high standards. Some doctors treat their patients according to the results of their lab tests, while others are more inclined to consider a patient's symptoms only. Ideally, you will find a doctor who considers both factors in making a diagnosis and deciding on treatment.

Doing some research before you start seeing a doctor can help you find a good physician. After all, having a chronic condition means you'll be seeing a lot more of the health care profession. It will also mean working more closely with your doctors on matters important to your well-being.

So even if the doctor comes to you from your mother, you may find him unsuitable in ways that don't bother your mom.

Some good questions to ask his staff include:

[BL]Does the physician specialize in the treatment of thyroid disease?

[BL]Does he already have many patients with thyroid disease?

Does he have a long waiting list?

[BL]What kinds of alliances does the physician have with other healthcare professionals? Is she plugged in to a network of other medical professionals or affiliated with a good hospital?

[BL]Are there other people in her practice who can assist in your care?

[BL]What kind of health insurance does the doctor accept?

[BL]Would it upset him if you sought a second opinion?

[BL]What does he think of alternative therapies?

[BL]How convenient is the office to your home or work place?

On your first few encounters, take note of the doctor's communication skills. Does he speak clearly in words you understand and answer your questions? Does he make you feel comfortable in his presence? Does he call back when you need assistance or information.

Also, take note of the office support staff. Schedulers, nurses, and assistants who are courteous and respectful can make a big difference in how well you do with your doctor. They can also affect how likely you are to see your doctor when you really need him.

Keep in mind too, that the best doctor may not be the one whose is closest to you. In more complicated cases, you may need to travel quite a distance to find the best doctor.

[H1]What to Expect from a Good Doctor

[NF]We all have expectations of the people we hire. Doctors should be no different. When you choose a doctor to treat you for thyroid disease, you should look for someone who first and foremost believes that your symptoms are real. The doctor should also have confidence in finding relief for your symptoms. He should be well-versed in all facets of thyroid disease and be on top of the research that's going on. A doctor who is actually involved in research and attends meetings on thyroid disease for instance, demonstrates a commitment to knowing as much as possible. She should also be an effective communicator who can speak to you in comprehensible terms without using complex medical terminology. At the same time, she needs to be a good listener, even when you're challenging her or telling him you'd like a second opinion. He should always invite you to ask questions and offer ideas.

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[SB]No patient should ever tolerate a doctor who is rude, insensitive, and dismissive of your complaints and concerns. You

also shouldn't tolerate a doctor who doesn't speak to you in comprehensible terms, or who routinely passes you off on to his staff. Your doctor should also have a plan to diagnose and treat you. Remember, you are the client, and you have the right to "fire" your doctor.

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Finally, a good doctor should be open, honest and forthcoming with information. She should be willing to provide you with any report or information you want, even when the news is bad. And she shouldn't be insulted when you tell her you want a second opinion.

[H1]Specialists You Might Need

[NF]In some people, thyroid disease requires more than just an endocrinologist or your primary care doctor. For instance, if you have Graves' disease and develop eye problems, you may need an ophthalmologist. If you have thyroid cancer, you may need a surgeon to remove your thyroid. If your thyroid problems begin to affect your emotional state, you may require the services of a

psychiatrist. And almost everyone with thyroid disease needs a good pharmacist who can spot potential drug interactions.

Finding these specialists often begins with your primary care doctor. If you're lucky, you'll get a good referral, and that's good enough. But if you don't like the specialist your doctor recommends, check around with friends and family again, or do your own research on the Internet. You can also go back to your primary doctor for another recommendation. Here are some of the key players who might wind up on your medical team.

[H2]Doctor in Nuclear Medicine

The use of radioactive iodine in the treatment of thyroid disorders has been around since the 1940s. But even though the treatment is nothing new, it does require a doctor who is skilled in the use of nuclear medicine and who works in a facility in compliance with the laws of your state.

According to the Society of Nuclear Medicine, doctors who administer RAI should be board certified in nuclear medicine, radiology, or radiation oncology, “or be able to document

equivalent training, competency, and experience in the safe use and administration of I-131², which is iodine-131, the isotope most commonly used.

Doctors who pursue a career in nuclear medicine train for at least three years after graduating from medical school. They must go through a year of preparatory training in a program approved by the Accreditation Council For Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) and then two or more years of a nuclear medicine residency in a program accredited by the ACGME. They also receive training in clinical nuclear medicine and in other health sciences. Generally, it is your endocrinologist who refers you to a doctor who specializes in nuclear medicine.

[H2]Thyroid Surgeons

Several kinds of doctors are able to do surgical procedures on the thyroid. General surgeons, head and neck surgeons, and ear, nose, and throat surgeons are all potentially capable of doing thyroid surgery. But the most important criterion for your choice of a surgeon is the surgeon's experience. The amount of experience the

surgeon has is inversely related to the complications rate – that means, the more experienced the surgeon, the less likely you'll suffer complications.

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[SB]We all have that gut instinct that tells us something isn't right.

So if a doctor gives you bad vibes, trust your inner voice, even if the doctor is saying all the things you want to hear, accepts your health insurance, and offers office hours that match your schedule.

Your gut may be responding to something more important than just the bare facts.

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Judging a surgeon's experience involves asking some simple questions ahead of time. In addition to those above that you might ask a doctor, good questions for a surgeon include:

[BL]How many thyroid surgeries do you do in a year? Ideally, the surgeon should do 20 to 25 surgeries. Some people – including the New York Thyroid Center -- recommend looking for surgeons who do 50 a year.

[BL]How many thyroid surgeries have you done in your career?

Again, the more surgeries a surgeon has done, the better skilled he is. Someone who has done 500 or more procedures is generally considered experienced, according to the New York Thyroid Center.

[BL]What kind of training did you have? A skilled surgeon will discuss any specialty training he might have had in endocrine surgery – and specifically thyroid surgery.

[BL]Are you involved in research in thyroid disease? Involvement in any type of thyroid research is a good indicator that the surgeon is interested in learning as much as possible about the thyroid.

[H2]Ophthalmologist

In people who have Graves' disease, the eyes may be affected. That's when you might need the help of an ophthalmologist, a medical doctor who treats the eyes. Unlike an optometrist, an ophthalmologist can prescribe medications and do surgery.

Problems with the eyes that result from Graves' disease is called Graves' ophthalmology. In the scheme of eye disorders, this is a

relatively rare condition. For the best treatment and care, you should find an ophthalmologist who specializes in thyroid-related eye disease. These doctors are more likely to have the skills, expertise, and resources to treat your eye problems. And in the event you need surgery to correct your eye disease, you will most definitely an ophthalmologist who specializes in thyroid-related eye disease.

[H2]Mental Health Professional

It's not unusual for serious health problems to affect your mental well-being. Many patients wind up suffering from depression or anxiety as a result of their health issues. If you are one of them, you should seek out a mental health professional. Don't be shy about getting this kind of help. Mood disorders like depression can be very serious and affect your ability to take care of yourself.

Mental health professionals can come from many backgrounds, including psychiatry, psychology, social work, and counseling. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who in addition to counseling and therapy, can prescribe medications. A psychologist is a mental

health professional who can offer counseling and do psychotherapy, but are not medical doctors. Some people may also need a psychopharmacologist, a psychiatrist who specializes in administering medicines for difficult psychiatric problems.

Social workers are people who have at least a master's degree in social work and may provide counseling services. Some people may also seek counseling from a trusted clergy person.

[H2]Pharmacists

Before you got sick, you probably saw a pharmacist only a few times a year. But if you have a thyroid disorder, your pharmacist may become an important ally.

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[SB]In our era of managed care, many people may get their prescription medications from a mail pharmacy. But if you are taking many drugs, you may be better off going to a local pharmacy, where you can deal with a real person and get more personalized services.

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Pharmacists can alert you to potentially dangerous drug interactions and possible side effects from any medications you're prescribed. He can tell you whether an over-the-counter remedy or herbal supplement will interact with a prescription medication you're taking. She can also advise you on whether drugs require food before they're ingested. A good relationship with a pharmacist can become vital to your health, so choose one you like, and use that person for all your prescriptions.

[H1]You're the Boss

[NF]It's easy to defer to your doctor when it comes to medical problems. After all, your doctor is the trained professional who knows the fancy five-syllable words. And in reality, he may know considerably more than you do about how your thyroid functions, the diagnostic tools you need to pinpoint the problem, and what you need to get well. On the other hand, if you've been doing your research, your knowledge may even surpass your physician's.

The bottom line is this: patients are the head of their health team.

That's right: you're the boss, the team captain. If you don't like the

way a doctor handles your care, you have the right to demand better treatment – or to go to another doctor. It’s ultimately up to you whether you’ll use that person’s services.

Being in charge also means you have to be assertive about what you want and need. So if you’ve always felt uncomfortable talking to your primary care doctor or disliked the staff that made your appointments and took your phone calls, now is the time to do something and find someone new.

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[SB]If you’ve just been diagnosed with a thyroid disorder, make sure you schedule a follow-up visit a few weeks after your first visit. Anticipate regular visits after that, so your doctor can check whether the medications are working. Regular visits to your doctor are now a part of your routine, and critical to your health and well-being. Some doctors will also follow up by email or phone.

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The key to spearheading any team – sports, corporate, or healthcare -- is knowing what you want. In this case, you should

figure out what you want from your healthcare providers. Do you want someone whose office hours match your work hours? Does the office location make a difference? Do you prefer young doctors fresh out of medical school or doctors who've been in practice for several years? The answers to these questions can help you zero in on the doctors who will make up your team.

[H1]The Doctor-Patient Relationship

[NF]You think you've found the perfect doctor. She's got all the right credentials, a warm and friendly manner, and a nice support staff, too. She even has ideal office hours in a good location. Now, it's time to get to the business of diagnosing what's wrong and making sure that you stay healthy. Like any relationship, you want it to get off on a good start.

[H2]The First Visit

Once you've located the right doctor, you will need to make time for a thorough exam and evaluation. Make sure to set aside enough time for this appointment, so you won't feel rushed, especially if you get delayed. This first visit is critical to helping your doctor

make a diagnosis and determine your need for further testing and any work with specialists. Most important, it will set the tone for the future of your relationship.

Among the things you can expect at this first visit are:

[BL]A frank and thorough discussion of your symptoms, when they began and how they're affecting you.

[BL]A detailed medical history of you and your family.

[BL]Descriptions of any changes in your health, such as changes in appetite, sleep patterns, weight loss or gain, and cognitive function.

[BL]Discussions about your lifestyle, including diet and exercise habits, and your consumption of drugs and alcohol.

A thorough physical examination and open honest dialogue are important to help your doctor rule out other health problems. So don't be hesitant to discuss all your health concerns. You may find it embarrassing that you're having more frequent bowel movements or that your libido is low, but your doctor will find it useful information toward a proper diagnosis. Remember, he's probably heard it all before.

[H2]Keep Good Records

Now that you've assembled a medical team, it's up to you to serve as its leader. That means it's up to you to keep track of what's going on with your tests, appointments, and medications.

A big part of that job is keeping well-organized medical records.

Doctors see hundreds of patients a year, and it can get hard to keep track of which patient takes which medication, or when he last saw you. When it comes time to see you, he'll rely on what you tell them to help them figure out what to do next. In addition, doctors can move, so it's a good idea to start keeping those records right from the start. Good medical records should include information about:

[H3]Your Medications

You should always keep with you an updated list of all medications you take, including the dose of your pills and when you take them. You should also keep a separate list of medicines you have tried, including the dose used and why you stopped using it, which can help your doctors decide what to prescribe.

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[SB]If you choose to enlist an alternative health practitioner – such as a homeopath or chiropractor – use that treatment to complement your thyroid care, not replace the treatment of your primary doctor or endocrinologist. Also, be wary of any doctor who promises you quick relief, a special diet for your weight problems, or even a cure. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

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[H3]Any Doctor Visit

Record all your doctor visits in one place, even dental checkups.

Write down the date you went, the purpose of your visit, any symptoms you were experiencing and any medications or therapies you were prescribed. Also record your weight and blood pressure.

[H3]Consultation Reports from Specialists

Any time you see a specialist, ask for a report of the visit. These typed narrative reports, sometimes addressed to your primary care doctor, provide comprehensive descriptions of your symptoms, what happened during the exam, and any lab findings. The

specialist may also offer an analysis of the problem and a plan of action.

[H3]All Tests

Whenever your doctor orders blood work for a TSH test, ultrasound, or an x-ray, make sure to ask for copies, too. You might want to store this information on a spreadsheet on your computer. Over time, these reports can reveal how your health is changing. For instance, an annual increase in your blood sugar levels may alert you to impending diabetes. If necessary, give the receptionist a self-addressed stamped envelope to ensure you get the information. Some doctors may even send the results or dictations by email.

[H3]Preventive Screenings

When you have a chronic condition, it's important to keep track of all medical information, even preventive screenings that show you are healthy. Down the road that information can establish a pattern. For instance, even if you're bone density tests are still in the

normal range, they can, over time, reveal a decrease in density that may show you to be at risk for osteoporosis.

[H3]Discharge Summaries

If you're hospitalized, the attending physician will write up a summary of your visit, the procedures you underwent, the diagnosis, and your health status. If you have an outpatient procedure, ask for an operative report, which details your visit.

[H1]Be a Good Patient

[NF]It's easy for patients to gripe when their doctors are rude, arrogant, and perpetually late. But patients can be problematic, too. To get the most out of your doctor, you have to do your part in this vital relationship and be a good patient. That means you should always arrive on time and call the office to let them know when you're running late. It means treating the office support staff with the same courtesy that you expect from them.

Like any good relationship, good communication is the basis of your rapport. As the patient, it's important that you communicate openly and honestly with your doctor. Ask questions whenever

you're uncertain. Listen closely to what your doctor tells you, even writing down what he says, if necessary. Don't allow yourself to get sidetracked by irrelevant information, which will waste everybody's time. If you don't like a treatment she suggests, say so and ask for alternatives. And pay attention to your doctor's body language. When he starts glancing at his watch, he may be subtly telling you that he's running late.

Good communication will form the foundation of a successful relationship with your doctor. For some people, that might mean being more assertive and outspoken than you have been in the past. If that makes you uneasy, try writing down your questions and concerns in advance, which can also save time.

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[SB]If you love your doctor, but hate the wait, look for ways to make use of your time in the waiting lounge. Whether it's knitting, catching up on your reading, or working on your computer, treat the time as an opportunity to do something. You can also use the

time to prepare for your appointment by reviewing your notes and questions.

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At the appointment, bring a notebook and take notes. It's easy to forget some minor detail during a visit, so jot down anything that you think might be important. Some doctors may even allow you to tape record the visit – just make sure to ask first. Anything you do to help you recall the information will spare your doctor the aggravation of follow-up phone calls and questions later on.

Also, be sure to follow through on what your doctor tells you to do. If he asks you to get a blood test, do so promptly. If she asks you to take a medication, take it exactly as she specifies. It's upsetting to doctors who are trying to treat patients, only to find that their directions are being ignored.

Finally, be polite, but firm. Doctors are more likely to dismiss an angry patient who becomes rude and hostile than one who is unemotional and assertive. You'll be more likely to be heard if you present yourself in a calm and professional manner. And

remember, pay your bill on time. Prompt payment is part of your end of the bargain and will ensure good treatment at later visits. All good relationships take effort on the part of both people in order to make things work. As the patient, you have to do your part to ensure a smooth relationship with your doctor. Keep in mind that the doctors you work with will be the same ones you see through the years as you continue to manage and monitor your thyroid disease. A strong and trusting relationship will help ensure that you stay healthy.

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