

What if My Doctor's Office has a PA or NP?

Ten years ago when my husband called to make an appointment with his doctor for an annual physical, the receptionist told him the first opening was in four months—he might as well have waited until next year! But then she mentioned that the doctor's PA could see him the following week. Although neither of us was quite sure what exactly PA stood for, he took the appointment and was quite satisfied with the result. In fact, since then, he's only seen the PA—he can count on being seen immediately when he's sick and the PA has provided excellent advice and care. They have a great working relationship and my husband has total confidence in his PA.

So just what is a PA and why should you care?

A physician's assistant or associate (PA) is a licensed, certified clinician who works under the supervision of a physician. If the doctor has a PA in his practice, it is very likely he will participate in your treatment and be a significant resource for your questions. More and more medical practices have PAs as a patient's primary care provider. PAs go through an abbreviated medical school program that typically lasts two to three years. They take classes and do hospital rotations alongside medical students. Some go on for further training in a specialty like surgery or psychiatry.

Nurse practitioners have also become a more common part of a doctor's practice, especially in the face of rising healthcare costs and a growing shortage of MDs. A nurse practitioner (NP) is a registered nurse (RN) who has advanced education, such as a master's degree, and extensive clinical experience. Under regulations that vary by state, a nurse practitioner is generally allowed to work alone or with a medical team and to examine, diagnose, and prescribe medication for patients. Nurse practitioners work in primary care and in a number of specialties for which they may be certified by a national board.

Because both PAs and NPs often can spend more time with patients, you might feel more comfortable asking detailed questions and sharing more of your own story, which in turn can help them help you. They tend to focus on prevention, taking the whole person into account rather than focusing only on the presenting symptoms or illness. And of course, if ever they feel even slightly out of their depth regarding a patient's condition, they turn to their supervising physician for consultation.

Bottom line? Don't hesitate to take full advantage of your doctor's PA or NP if they're on staff.