

How to Find a Doctor

Healthcare Providers Who Treat Patients with Osteoporosis

For many individuals, finding a doctor who is knowledgeable about osteoporosis can be difficult. There is no physician specialty solely dedicated to osteoporosis, nor is there a certification program for health professionals who treat the disease.

Over time, some doctors in various medical specialties have gained the knowledge and expertise to diagnose and treat people with osteoporosis. These specialties include endocrinology, family practice, geriatrics, gynecology, internal medicine, orthopedics, physical medicine and rehabilitation, and rheumatology. Not all doctors within a given specialty, however, have expertise in osteoporosis.

There are a number of ways to find a doctor who treats patients with osteoporosis. If you have a primary care physician or family doctor, discuss your concerns with him or her first. You may find that your doctor is quite knowledgeable about osteoporosis. If not, your doctor may be able to refer you to someone who specializes in osteoporosis. If you are enrolled in an HMO or managed care plan, your assigned physician should be able to assist you or give you an appropriate referral.

Your own doctor, regardless of the specialty, may be the best person to treat you because he/she knows your medical history, lifestyle and special needs. If you do not have a personal physician or your doctor cannot help, you can contact your nearest community hospital or medical center and ask if there is a department or program that cares for patients with osteoporosis. This department varies from hospital to hospital. For example, in some facilities, the department of endocrinology or metabolic bone disease treats osteoporosis patients, and in others it may be the department of rheumatology, orthopedics or gynecology. Some hospitals have a separate osteoporosis program or women's health clinic that treats osteoporosis patients. Not all hospitals, however, have departments or programs that focus on osteoporosis.

To help you locate a healthcare provider to treat your osteoporosis, the National Osteoporosis Foundation (NOF) has developed a Professional Partner's Network (PPN) directory. Any healthcare provider can become a member of the PPN. Members pay an annual fee and provide a description of the services they offer. NOF makes no representations or guarantees about the qualifications or quality of care provided by any of the members listed in the directory. NOF simply offers this public service to individuals seeking a healthcare provider who has expressed an interest in osteoporosis prevention and/or treatment services.

The directory does not necessarily include all professionals in any geographic area nor does inclusion in this list imply an endorsement by NOF of the physician or healthcare organization or the quality of services offered. Consumers need to make appropriate local inquiries about the qualifications and reputations of listed providers. Always ask whether a doctor has specialized training in osteoporosis and how much of the medical practice is dedicated to osteoporosis.

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For a listing of PPN healthcare providers in your state, visit NOF's Web site at www.nof.org. Click on Find a Healthcare Professional at the top and use the pull-down menu for the list in your state. If you do not have a computer, you may be able to access the Internet at your local public library.

Because many hospitals now have physician referral services, you may want to inquire whether your local hospital has a referral service. Let the referral service know that you are seeking a doctor who has specialized knowledge in treating patients with osteoporosis. If you prefer a doctor in a specific specialty, such as endocrinology, tell the referral service that you would like an endocrinologist who diagnoses and treats patients with osteoporosis.

Another suggestion is to check with your local hospitals. Many hospital websites list the physicians that are on staff. Take a look at the information about the individual doctors, like their clinical interests and subspecialties. In addition to bone health or osteoporosis, you may see the term "metabolic bone disease," which includes the treatment of osteoporosis. If you are unable to locate a healthcare provider in your area, the following organizations may be able to help:

American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists (AACE)

Website: www.aace.com (Choose: "Click Here to Find an Endocrinologist" and look for providers who list osteoporosis as an interest area); Phone: 1 (904) 353-7878.

American College of Rheumatology (ACR)

Website: www.rheumatology.org (Choose: "Find a Member" to find a rheumatologist near you); Note: ACR cannot provide physician names over the phone; areas of interest aren't included in the online directory.

The Hormone Foundation

Website: www.hormone.org (Choose: "Find an Endocrinologist" and look for providers who list "osteoporosis & bone health" as an area of concentration); Phone: 1 (800) 467-6663.

Medical Specialists Who Often Treat Osteoporosis (in alphabetical order)

Endocrinologists treat the endocrine system, which includes the glands and hormones that help control the body's metabolic activity. In addition to osteoporosis, conditions often treated by endocrinologists include diabetes, thyroid disorders and pituitary diseases.

Family physicians have a broad range of training that includes surgery, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology and pediatrics. They place special emphasis on caring for an individual or family on a long-term, continuing basis.

Geriatricians are family healthcare providers or internists. They receive additional training on the aging process and are able to evaluate and treat the common conditions and diseases that may occur among the elderly, including ongoing health issues, incontinence, falls and dementia.

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Gynecologists diagnose and treat conditions of the female reproductive system and associated disorders. They may serve as primary healthcare providers for women and follow their patients' reproductive health over time.

Internists are trained in the essentials of overall care of general internal medicine. Internists diagnose and non-surgically treat all diseases of the body. They provide long-term comprehensive care in the hospital and office and often act as consultants to other specialists. They develop expertise in many areas including cardiology, neurology, and pulmonology.

Orthopedic surgeons are healthcare providers trained in the care of patients with musculoskeletal problems. They treat patients with congenital skeletal deformities, bone injuries and infections, and metabolic disturbances. Also called orthopedists, they are surgeons who operate to correct, fix or replace joints and limbs.

Physiatrists are healthcare providers who specialize in physical medicine and rehabilitation. Physiatrists evaluate and treat patients with impairments, disabilities or pain arising from musculoskeletal, neurological or other system problems. Physiatrists focus on restoring the physical, psychological, social and occupational functioning of the individual.

Rheumatologists diagnose and treat diseases of the joints, muscles, bones and tendons, including arthritis and collagen diseases. The rheumatologist may work closely with other specialists such as orthopedists, physiatrists and physical therapists.

Other Healthcare Professionals

Physical therapists, with experience in osteoporosis, are a resource for patients seeking guidance on appropriate exercise and activities and those to avoid. Physical therapists can perform balance assessment and training that is important in preventing falls and can also help with posture, body mechanics and safe movement. A written prescription is usually required to see a physical therapist.

Dietitians are a resource for nutrition information and special dietary needs. Most hospitals have dietitians on staff, and many offer outpatient instruction.