



# Primary Care

## Primary Care

In defining primary care, it is necessary to describe the nature of services provided to patients, as well as to identify who are the primary care providers. The domain of primary care includes the primary care physician, other physicians who include some primary care services in their practices, and some non-physician providers. However, central to the concept of primary care is the patient. Therefore, such definitions are incomplete without including a description of the primary care practice.

The following five definitions relating to primary care should be taken together. They describe the care provided to the patient, the system of providing such care, the types of physicians whose role in the system is to provide primary care, and the role of other physicians, and non-physicians, in providing such care. Taken together they form a framework within which patients will have access to efficient and effective primary care services of the highest quality.

### Definition #1 - Primary Care

Primary care is that care provided by physicians specifically trained for and skilled in comprehensive first contact and continuing care for persons with any undiagnosed sign, symptom, or health concern (the "undifferentiated" patient) not limited by problem origin (biological, behavioral, or social), organ system, or diagnosis.

Primary care includes health promotion, disease prevention, health maintenance, counseling, patient education, diagnosis and treatment of acute and chronic illnesses in a variety of health care settings (e.g., office, inpatient, critical care, long-term care, home care, day care, etc.). Primary care is performed and managed by a personal physician often collaborating with other health professionals, and utilizing consultation or referral as appropriate. Primary care provides patient advocacy in the health care system to accomplish cost-effective care by coordination of health care services. Primary care promotes effective communication with patients and encourages the role of the patient as a partner in health care.

### Definition #2 - Primary Care Practice

A primary care practice serves as the patient's first point of entry into the health care system and as the continuing focal point for all needed health care services. Primary care practices provide patients with ready access to their own personal physician, or to an established back-up physician when the primary physician is not available.

Primary care practices provide health promotion, disease prevention, health maintenance, counseling, patient education, diagnosis and treatment of acute and chronic illnesses in a variety of health care settings (e.g., office, inpatient, critical care, long-term care, home care, day care, etc.).

Primary care practices are organized to meet the needs of patients with undifferentiated problems, with the vast majority of patient concerns and needs being cared for in the primary care practice itself. Primary care practices are generally located in the community of the patients, thereby facilitating access to health care while maintaining a wide variety of specialty and institutional consultative and referral relationships for specific care needs. The structure of the primary care practice may include a team of physicians and non-physician health professionals.

### Definition #3 - Primary Care Physician

A primary care physician is a generalist physician who provides definitive care to the undifferentiated patient at the point of first contact and takes continuing responsibility for providing the patient's care. Such a physician must be specifically trained to provide primary care services.

Primary care physicians devote the majority of their practice to providing primary care services to a defined population of patients. The style of primary care practice is such that the personal primary care physician serves as the entry point for substantially all of the patient's medical and health care needs - not limited by problem origin, organ system, or diagnosis. Primary care physicians are advocates for the patient in coordinating the use of the entire health care system to benefit the patient.

### Definition #4 - Non-Primary Care Physicians Providing Primary Care Services

Physicians who are not trained in the primary care specialties of family medicine, general internal medicine, or general pediatrics may sometimes provide patient care services that are usually delivered by primary care physicians. These physicians may focus on specific patient care needs related to prevention, health maintenance, acute care, chronic care or rehabilitation. These physicians, however, do not offer these services within the context of comprehensive, first contact

### SEE ALSO

- Primary Care Physician, Generic (<http://www.aafp.org/about/policies/all/primary-care-generic.html>)
- Primary Care Services for Limited Specialists (<http://www.aafp.org/about/policies/all/primary-care-limited.html>)
- Capitation, Primary Care (<http://www.aafp.org/about/policies/all/capitation-care.html>)

and continuing care.

The contributions of physicians who deliver some services usually found within the scope of primary care practice may be important to specific patient needs. However, the absence of a full scope of training in primary care requires that these individuals work in close consultation with fully-trained, primary care physicians. An effective system of primary care may utilize these physicians as members of the health care team with a primary care physician maintaining responsibility for the function of the health care team and the comprehensive, ongoing health care of the patient.

**Definition #5 - Non-Physician Primary Care Providers**

There are providers of health care other than physicians who render some primary care services. Such providers may include nurse practitioners, physician assistants and some other health care providers.

These providers of primary care may meet the needs of specific patients. They should provide these services in collaborative teams in which the ultimate responsibility for the patient resides with the primary care physician. (1975) (2006)

\*In this document, the term physician refers only to doctors of medicine (M.D.) and osteopathy (D.O.).

**Use of Term**

The AAFP recognizes the term "primary care" and that family physicians provide services commonly recognized as primary care. However, the terms, "primary care" and "family medicine" are not interchangeable. "Primary care" does not fully describe the activities of family physicians nor the practice of family medicine. Similarly, primary care departments do not replace the form or function of family medicine departments. (1977) (2011 COD)

---

Primary Care -- AAFP Policies -- AAFP

<http://www.aafp.org/about/policies/all/primary-care.html>

Copyright © 2013 American Academy of Family Physicians. All rights reserved.

11400 Tomahawk Creek Parkway • Leawood, KS 66211-2680

800.274.2237 • 913.906.6000 • Fax: 913.906.6075 • [contactcenter@aafp.org](mailto:contactcenter@aafp.org)

