

# Who is my first point of contact with the health care system?

## What is primary care and who provides it?

Primary care is the first point of contact between a patient and the health care system. Primary care providers are trained to deal with any health problem and form relationships with patients and families to help them manage health concerns over time (1,2). Primary care providers help prevent illness, diagnose and treat disease and link patients with specialist care (when needed) (1).

Most of the time in Ontario, primary care is provided by a family doctor or nurse practitioner. Nurse practitioners are qualified to treat certain conditions without the direct supervision of a doctor (1). Depending on where you live, primary care can look like:



a single family physician with a receptionist, or a team of family doctors



nursing stations for people living in isolated communities



teams of specialized nurses, dieticians, pharmacists, social workers, and others, led by family doctors or nurse practitioners (1).

## Why is primary care important?



### People who receive primary care regularly:

- are healthier and tend to live longer; and
- are less likely to die from heart disease, cancer or stroke than those who do not (2).

Overall, people who see the same primary care provider over time are happier with their care, more likely to follow medical advice and have lower costs of care than those who do not (2,3).



People who don't have a first point of contact like a family doctor may delay seeking needed care or rely on emergency departments to meet their health care needs (2,4).

## Is there a shortage of primary care doctors?

Many Canadian provinces, including Ontario, are experiencing a shortage of family doctors that is expected to increase as more retire (5,7). Changes to the supply of family physicians may impact each region in different ways (8). Good data can help each region with health workforce planning for the future, to ensure all Ontarians can access a family doctor when they need care.

The recently released [Primary Care Data Reports \(PCDR\)](#) contain data that can help regional health systems in Ontario better understand the people they care for, including their:

age, sex, income



health status (including diabetes, frailty, congestive heart failure, mental health condition)

health care use  
(emergency department visits, hospitalizations)



visits with the family doctor  
(number of visits, follow ups after hospitalization)



## How can someone without a doctor get health care?

In Ontario, anyone can get health care advice from a registered nurse by dialing 811. This is a free, confidential service which is staffed 24 hours a day. It is designed for non-urgent health issues. [Health811](#) operates a similar service which can be accessed online anonymously by live chat. People without a primary care provider can register online or by phone (1-800-445-1822) for the [Health Care Connect](#) program to be connected to a primary care provider accepting new patients in their area.

To learn more and see our references, please visit: <https://perc-phc.mcmaster.ca/>

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