

Prioritizing Primary Care

Every year, millions of Americans are diagnosed with health conditions that could have either been managed before worsening or prevented altogether. This is due in large part to the percentage of people who avoid going to the doctor until absolutely necessary – and even then will typically resort to an urgent care or emergency room when a health concern arises.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Americans who were seeking care from a primary care provider hit an all-time low. However, even before the pandemic, a JAMA study showed that the proportion of U.S. adults with a primary care physician fell from 77% in 2002 to 75% in 2015. Dr. Andy Peterson, a primary care physician at OSF HealthCare Saint Luke Medical Center in Kewanee, Illinois, discusses the importance of preventative healthcare and the importance of finding a primary care provider who fits your individual needs.

“Primary care is what I consider as somebody’s main physician, so that is who you are going to go to with the first step for any health problems in my mind. It is kind of your first stop in the world of medicine to say, ‘I am going to go to this primary care doctor, figure out what is going on, work it up a little bit’ – and if we think that we need help from a specialist, then we do that,” says Dr. Peterson.

Despite the fact that you may not be experiencing any current health issues, Dr. Peterson urges individuals to find and develop a relationship with a primary care provider.

“Even if you’re feeling okay, even if you have no complaints, there are so many preventative things we do in the world of primary care to keep you healthy if you are feeling healthy. Whether that be evaluating your family history, your personal history, and deciding if you would benefit from checking for diseases like high cholesterol or diabetes – because the earlier we catch that stuff, the less likely it is to cause problems down the road,” Dr. Peterson explains.

While preventative care is imperative, injuries or illness are often the main drivers for those seeking care. Sometimes people need to bypass primary care if the need is emergent. Dr. Peterson urges anyone experiencing chest pain, signs of stroke, trouble breathing, or any other life-threatening injury or illness to call 9-1-1 or to head to the ER immediately. Urgent care locations like OSF OnCall and OSF PromptCare are also great options for conditions that are not life-threatening, but need to be taken care of right away.

However, if you are seeing medical advice for something more general or non-emergent, or you simply want to get a baseline understanding of your general health, a primary care provider is the recommended route.

“If you walk into an urgent care or a prompt care or any other clinic and you have something going on with you, if that person has never met you before they have to kind of catch up on your entire medical history to make sure that they are treating you appropriately – whereas if you walk in the door to your primary care physician and you have something going on, they are going to know that background history already and be more prepared to take care of you,” says Dr. Peterson.

From annual wellness checks and vaccinations to chronic disease management and a full picture of your overall health, a primary care provider will give you a comprehensive level of care and can see people all across the board – from birth and beyond.

“I’m a firm believer that good primary care is how we improve healthcare around this country. Making sure we are staying up-to-date on all the preventative measures, talking about healthy food choices and activity – all of those sorts of things that go into preventative care. And then if you have problems, you have somebody who kind of knows you well, knows those problems well, knows what treatments you’re on, and helps you best manage some of those acute things that may pop up or new things that pop up,” Dr. Peterson says.

To find a primary care physician near you, go to <http://providers.osfhealthcare.org>.