Essential Tips for Finding a Rheumatologist

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How to Find a Rheumatologist

Before seeking out a rheumatologist, some people turn to their general doctor for advice. Often when medical history, ongoing symptoms, and a physical examination rule out that something may be wrong, a referral to see a specialist, such as a rheumatologist is given. There are times when a patient does not have the opportunity to be given a referral and thus needs to find a rheumatologist on their own. Either way, it's important to know what a rheumatologist can do for you and the steps you need to take to ensure you are in good hands. So, here we give you tips on how to find a rheumatologist. This can be a tricky journey, but you're not alone.

Rheumatology 101

Before searching for a rheumatologist, one must understand what this type of doctor does. Learning the basics will help when it comes time for your doctor to prescribe any medication or advise you on what lifestyle changes can be beneficial moving forward.

As a board-certified internist, a rheumatologist completes more training after the initial four years of medical school. They are taught and given real-life experience on how to diagnose and treat a person who is suspected to have one or more, of the 100 types of arthritis and other diseases that affect the joints, bones, and muscles.

Some of the rheumatic diseases a rheumatologist is trained to treat range from osteoarthritis, gout, tendonitis, rheumatoid arthritis, back pain, osteoporosis, and other autoimmune disorders, such as lupus and scleroderma. The main reason people see a rheumatologist is because they have pain in either their joints, muscles, bones, or all three, which is severe and persists for more than a few days, weeks or months.

Rheumatic diseases are extremely difficult to diagnosis and other times to treat, mainly because the symptoms of one disease is also what is seen in hundreds of other diseases, especially if the disease is in the early stages where symptoms can come and go, causing patients to wonder if anything is seriously wrong. This is seen in young individuals and those who are active in sports, where it's more common to experience pain and injuries, thus making it difficult to differentiate. This is when seeking out the care of a rheumatologist is beneficial because they have more expertise and tools at their disposal, due to the advances in medical research and testing that has made it easier than before to rule out what the cause is. The telltale sign something is off, is how the disease is evolving and progressing over time. With high-intense activity, pain in the joints, muscles and bones resolve after a few days, but for those diagnosed with a rheumatic disease, it gets worse over time.

Rheumatologist vs General Doctor

With there being a shortage of rheumatologists, patients who require a specialist but are not near one have no choice but to see a general doctor. Many rural areas in the U.S. alone are hit the hardest, as rheumatology providers reside mostly in the urban and suburban areas. Worldwide, shortages are more common as impoverished areas struggle to keep up with the basic needs of their populations.

Key Differences

A general doctor can prescribe over the counter pain and anti-inflammatory medication and administer general blood tests that can be forwarded to a rheumatologist for closer examination. However, a rheumatologist can provide a targeted and specialized treatment plan for a patient; this is out of the scope of practice for many generalized doctors. If a patient is able, it's best to see a rheumatologist as soon as possible because rheumatic diseases respond the best to treatment that is administered in the early stages of the disease. Since rheumatic diseases are progressive, which means that it gets worse over time, it's important to get proper treatment.

Key Similarities

While a rheumatologist and a general doctor have stark differences, they are both medically trained and board-certified. Many rheumatologists will ask a patient who their primary care physician, or in this case, who their general doctor is. When going for a yearly physical to see your general doctor, they will also ask if anything has changed in your medical history since last seeing them. A general doctor is also called a family doctor, and they usually work in physician offices or hospitals where they see patients of all ages. You can rely on them to help manage the basic needs of your health from preventative care, physicals, screenings, immunizations, and common ailments, such as the cold or flu.

The beauty of seeing these two types of doctors is that they can both work together in your care. A rheumatologist can act as a sounding board for other doctors by advising them on what the diagnosis and treatment plan entails. Having all your doctors on the same page will not only benefit you but also them, so they can give you the best care possible.

How to Choose a Rheumatologist

Depending on each circumstance, choosing a rheumatologist may be the easiest thing you do or the hardest. Mainly because those patients who already have referrals can get in faster to see a rheumatologist, although a referral does not mean that the doctor will be a good fit for you or your needs. Some rheumatologists will only see a patient if they have a referral from another physician of any kind. However, other rheumatologists don't require referrals, and this is the most efficient way for those who need immediate care but have no connections. Your rheumatologist is first and foremost your doctor but is also an equal, and a teammate in order to get your health on track.

Finding a Rheumatologist Without Referral

For those who have no referrals, asking your general doctor or anyone you trust to provide you reputable resources is the first step. Second, is to look up organizations who have access to rheumatologists in or around your area. Most importantly, a patient should feel comfortable with the doctor they choose. Writing down a list of what you want in a doctor and what you do not want is a good idea. Sometimes patients don't know what constitutes a good doctor and that is when a referral from a trusted physician, family member, or friend can aid in your decision making.

Length of Practice

Another factor to consider is how long the rheumatologist has been practicing. You may want someone who is experienced but keeps up with the latest medical trends and advancements. Those medical doctors who are fairly new on the scene may have more knowledge of what is out there now, since they have studied recently. Though every rheumatologist needs to go for continued learning and stay on top of it for their patients, it's a good attribute regardless of the level of experience.

Also, gender is something that can narrow down your search considerably. If you know you would not feel comfortable seeing either a man or a woman, take this into consideration. Some female patients with rheumatoid arthritis could be more comfortable with someone of the same gender, as there are things such as menstrual cycles and childbearing at play.

The best way to know if a doctor is for you is to go by how you feel when you are around them. Do you feel positive, uplifted, and well taken care of? Then, that's a good sign. If you are feeling not heard, validated, dismissed or the doctor is not easily accessible, it may be time to reconsider another option. Do not be afraid to shop around for a doctor and see a few if you're able.

With the nature of the disease and a shortage of rheumatologists, wait times to get into seeing this type of specialist can range from days, weeks, months, or even years if they are closed to new patients.

Communication is Key

Communication style is one last factor that leads to either positive or negative outcomes. This can range from how good of a listener the doctor is, to explaining not only to you but loved ones what the course of action is and why.

Many patients are fearful of the medication prescribed and the prognosis of the disease. Having a rheumatologist who understands that and treats a patient like a human being rather than a number, is something to seek out.

Lastly, in the age of technology and telehealth taking the patient-doctor experience by storm since the pandemic began, seeing a rheumatologist's flexibility around this is crucial. If you don't feel safe going into the doctor's office or may not be feeling well to go in person, telehealth is a great ongoing option. See if this is important to you and the doctor you choose, because not all rheumatologists may offer this service long-term.

When is Research Helpful?

If you are looking for a rheumatologist, research must be conducted to find out if the rheumatologist is board-certified. A rheumatologist who has this credential is credible. Becoming board-certified only occurs after years of extensive training, and an acceptable passing test score for a test that is administered by the American Board of Internal Medicine, who is responsible for deciding which medical student becomes a full-fledged doctor.

Researching the school a doctor studied at and patient reviews on experiences are something to look into too. There are thousands of colleges and universities across the country and the world that provide aspiring medical students with a top-of-the-line education. Sometimes the school and awards don't matter, as it's also the experience and drive of the person in the white coat to help patients.

Takeaway

Finding a rheumatologist, and the right one for that matter, can be just as hard as the journey to getting a proper diagnosis. Once you can get in to see a rheumatologist, it's crucial to keep all your doctors on the same page. Referrals may not always be needed but can be helpful when up against long wait times to see this type of specialist. Factoring in what characteristics are important for you in a doctor can aid in your search by narrowing down options. Most importantly, whether it be a rheumatologist, general doctor, or both, it's important to have good communication, trust, and to feel comfortable with them. Otherwise, if those things aren't present switching doctors can be an option. Nobody should ever feel they need to stay with a doctor if it's not working. With any relationship, if it's not serving you, cutting ties is a must.