
Types of doctors and health professionals

Summary

- Visit your general practitioner (GP) first for most healthcare problems.
 - Your GP may refer you to a specialist for a specific health problem.
 - Visit a dentist for dental care or oral health treatment.
 - An allied health professional is a trained professional, such as a physiotherapist or speech pathologist, who works as part of the healthcare team.
 - Complementary medicine practitioners include acupuncturists and chiropractors.
 - Whatever type of doctor or health professional you consult, always make sure they are qualified and registered to practice in their health field.
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In Victoria, there are many types of doctors and health professionals who work in a growing number of healthcare areas. They have different levels of education, registration and accreditation required to practise in their field.

Some professions are registered and regulated by the **Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA)** or through other government recognised organisations. Others are not. Knowing that your health practitioner is trained and qualified in their field is important when choosing which type of health practitioner to see for your particular healthcare needs.

Medical care is no longer just about curing illness or injury. It includes preventing illness, managing chronic disease and the impact of ageing. These health areas require the skills not only of doctors and nurses, but of other health professionals, such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dietitians and social workers. The combination of health professionals who look after your healthcare needs forms your healthcare team, each with their own role.

Your doctor or GP

Many people have a local doctor or 'GP' (general practitioner) who is their first point of contact for health concerns. Some people have built a relationship with their GP over time, which can be beneficial as the doctor gets to understand that person's particular needs and medical history. GPs work in many types of health services including private medical centres and health clinics, community health services, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services.

Your GP will have trained in medicine and then specialised in the area of 'general practice'. They are qualified to treat people for general health problems, such as illnesses or injuries that cannot be treated by over-the-counter medication. They can diagnose and treat disease, pain and other conditions. They can also help with vaccinations and mental health advice. Some specialise in particular areas such as family practice or children's health.

Your GP is usually the best person to coordinate your overall healthcare, including ordering blood tests or scans and making referrals to other medical specialists.

Medical specialists

If your health problem is more specific, you may need to see a medical doctor who specialises in a particular area of health. Your GP will usually write a letter of introduction called a referral. This letter will explain your health problem to the specialist. If you have a chronic or ongoing medical problem, a medical specialist might become a part of your ongoing healthcare team.

There are many medical specialist areas or 'disciplines' recognised in Victoria. Some of these include general practice, anaesthetics, surgery, dermatology, emergency medicine, gynaecology, paediatrics, pathology, psychiatry, public health medicine, radiology and rehabilitation medicine.

Some medical specialists then undertake more training so they can become even more specialised within their

chosen discipline.

Dentists or oral health professionals

Dentists are your first point of contact for all oral health needs. Dentists and other oral health professionals treat and help prevent oral health problems, the most common of which are tooth cavities and gum disease.

Most dentists recommend a check-up every six to 12 months. However, if you take good care of your teeth and gums at home and do not have any ongoing problems, your dentist may recommend a longer time between visits.

Dentists and other oral health professionals can detect problems in the mouth that may indicate problems elsewhere in the body, such as heart disease.

Most dentists work in private practice. A small number work in public dentistry, dental hospitals or in the armed services. Dentists who are qualified to work in Victoria have completed a degree in dentistry, dental science or dental surgery at university.

Allied health professionals

Allied health professionals are university-trained practitioners who work as part of your healthcare team, often helping in your recovery following illness or injury, managing chronic conditions, or maintaining your wellbeing.

Some types of allied health professionals include dietitians, physiotherapists, podiatrists, speech pathologists and psychologists. Their role is often about improving quality of life and helping people to care for themselves.

Depending on the type of practice, allied health professionals work in hospitals, community health centres and private practice. Some work in schools and people's homes.

Complementary medicine practitioners

Complementary medicine is also known as alternative therapy, alternative medicine, holistic therapy and traditional medicine. The term 'complementary medicine' also includes complementary medicines such as vitamins, minerals, Chinese medicine, herbal and homeopathic products, and complementary therapies such as acupuncture.

Some people use complementary medicine as well as conventional medical care. It is important to let your doctor know about any complementary medicine products and therapies you are using, so they can incorporate these therapies into your overall care plan. Sometimes, they may advise against using a complementary medicine product if there is a risk of it interfering with other medication you are taking.

The lines between conventional and complementary medicine are blurring in some areas where complementary medicine is becoming more widely used. However, reliable evidence about the effect of complementary medicine therapies can be difficult to find, and some therapies do not have scientific evidence to back them up.

Complementary medicine practitioners mostly work in private practice. Some practitioners are covered by a national registration and accreditation scheme, such as Chinese medicine practitioners, osteopaths and chiropractors. This means they must meet agreed quality and standards of care. However, some complementary medicine practitioners are self-regulated, and any agreed standards of care set by the professional association do not carry legal obligations.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Dentist** or **oral health** professional
- Allied health professional
- Complementary medicine practitioner

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Department of Health and Human Services

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