



A guide for patients choosing a specialist

Choosing a specialist can be a shared decision between you and your GP or other referring health professional.

In Australia, specialists provide a high standard of care in both the public and private health systems.

Although the public health system offers many advantages, the private health system may give you more options, including choice of doctor, reduced wait times and greater flexibility when planning surgery or other procedures.

Consider your needs and preferences

Knowing your needs and preferences will help you and your GP choose a suitable specialist for you.

Accessibility

Some specialists have a shorter waitlist than others. The medical urgency of your condition can also affect wait times. You can call a specialist's practice to find out about usual wait times for the specialist.

Compatibility

How a specialist communicates can have an impact on your treatment experience. Ask your GP if they know whether the specialist is approachable and can explain your health needs and treatment options in a way that would make sense to you.

Costs

You can discuss costs and options with your GP and your specialist. To find out about typical costs, visit www.medicalcostsfinder.health.gov.au.

Your out-of-pocket costs will depend on your specialist's fees, contributions from Medicare, and in some cases, from your private health insurer. Refer to our brochure [A Guide to out-of-pocket costs](#) to help you plan for the cost of private medical treatment.

Field of practice

Some treatments are provided by specialists in more than one specialty. Some specialists focus on a few specific areas within their field, while others treat multiple conditions. Ask your GP how specialised you need your specialist to be.

Location

If convenience is important, let your GP know your preferred locations to receive specialist services. Your private health insurer may also be able provide you with advice about the specialists relevant to your needs in your preferred locations.

Weighing up your needs and preferences

	Very important	Moderately Important	Less important	Not important
Accessibility				
Compatibility				
Costs				
Field of practice				
Location				

Getting a referral

Talk to your GP

Your GP is usually familiar with different types of specialists. If they are referring you to someone they know you can always ask the following questions:

1. Why do you think this specialist meets my needs and preferences?
2. Are there other specialists that could perform the treatment or procedure? If so what are the benefits of using one specialist compared to the other?
3. How can I find out about the specialist's fees or how long their waitlist is?

If you would like more time to consider your options, you can choose to do more research or ask your GP for an **open referral**.

Make a note of what you learnt from your GP

Types of referrals

A referral gives the specialist important information about why you need to see them. Your referral will either be printed or electronic. You will be given a copy of the referral. An electronic referral may also be sent directly to the specialist.

Your GP can give you:

- a **named** referral with the name of a specific specialist
- a **multiple named referral** with the names of more than one specialist
- an **open referral**, which does not name any specialist. It is intended for any doctor practising in a particular specialty.

You can take a referral to any doctor who practices in the same specialty field. **A specialist does not have to see a patient, even if the patient has a referral.** Specialists can also choose the kind of referral (named or open) they will accept.

Keep your GP informed about which specialist you are seeing. This will help your GP stay up-to-date with your treatment, so they can follow up with your specialist as needed.

Do your own research

It may help to do some research before making an appointment with a specialist or while waiting to see one. This can help you to understand what may happen when you visit a specialist and what out-of-pocket costs to expect.

Talk to your private health insurer

If you need **in-hospital** treatment or procedures, ask your private health insurer the following questions:

1. Does my policy cover the treatment I need?
2. How much will my policy cover for the treatment I need?
3. Do you have a **no gap** or **known gap** arrangement with any specialists in my preferred location who provide the treatments I need?
4. Do you have arrangements with any hospitals where I could receive my treatment?
5. Are there specific specialist that can deliver the service I need in my preferred location?

Private health insurance does not cover out-of-hospital medical services such as GP visits, specialist consultations, or diagnostic imaging and tests that are covered by Medicare.

What did you learn from your private health insurer?

Ask your specialist

1. Will I need additional services for this procedure? Will I need other medical services? What are my available options (if any)?
2. What MBS item numbers will be used?
3. What other costs will I incur (i.e. anaesthetists, diagnostic imaging)?
4. Do you have a **no gap** or **known gap** arrangement with my private health insurer that you can apply?
5. Do you practise at more than one location?
6. What are the likely wait times?
7. When can I have an itemised quote for the treatment I need?

What did you learn from your specialist?

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