



Wednesday, March 26, 2008

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## Can't Find a Doctor? You're Not Alone

*By Nancy Shute*

Posted March 19, 2008

Amber Meiwes is happy to tell you what's wrong with primary care in America: It's hard to get any, and when you do, it's a health risk.

During a long struggle with recurring stomach pain, Meiwes got used to waiting three weeks to get in to see a doctor—and then being hustled back out in mere minutes. "They had way more patients than they really can see," says Meiwes, 29, of Piedmont, Okla. "They would say, Take an antacid and go home." When she fell ill on weekends, her only options were an after-hours clinic or the emergency room. It took three years of office visits and ER visits before she got a diagnosis: inactive gallbladder. "I got to the point where I wouldn't even go to the doctor anymore."

It's not supposed to work that way. A primary-care doctor is supposed to be the go-to doc for almost every ailment from ingrown toenails to suspicious breast lumps—the trusted guide to the system who knows the patient, her medical history, her family. Any time the patient must navigate the bumpy and often frightening path through specialty care, it's these internists and family and general practice doctors who make sure that nothing critical falls through the cracks. Indeed, study after study has shown that patients fare better in areas of the country not overpopulated by medical specialists and where primary-care physicians handle the bulk of care. Yet increasingly, the system is fraying. Consider:

- Twenty-nine percent of people with Medicare said they had trouble finding a doctor who would take that insurance in 2007, up from 24 percent the year before. That's 11.6 million people.
- Two thirds of Americans say they have a hard time getting medical care on nights, weekends, and holidays, according to 2007 survey by the Commonwealth Fund.

