



**American Board  
of Medical Specialties**

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**Facts About the 2008 ABMS Consumer Survey:  
How Americans Choose Their Doctors**

The American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) commissioned a consumer survey that was conducted in May 2008 by Opinion Research Corporation, Princeton, N.J. Consumers were randomly selected to participate in a telephone survey that primarily focused on factors considered in choosing a doctor, as well as consumer knowledge and perceptions of physician care and qualifications.

**Key Findings**

**Important Factors in Choosing a Doctor:**

The results of the survey emphasize that good communication skills, bedside manner and board certification are very important factors in choosing a doctor, and are ranked by most patients above the doctor's hospital affiliation, place of training or office location.

- 95 percent of participants surveyed said that bedside manner or communications skills are very important or important as a key factor when choosing a doctor.
- 91 percent of respondents said that board certification is "very important" or "important" in choosing a doctor.
- 25 percent said board certification is the "most important" of the physician qualities listed (second only to "bedside manner or communication skills with 34 percent).
- Other important factors when selecting a physician include:
  - Having a professional and friendly staff (97 percent)
  - Returning phone calls (97 percent)
  - Not being kept waiting (88 percent)
  - A recommendation from a friend or family member (82 percent)
  - Hospital affiliation (78 percent)
  - Office location (75 percent)
  - The hospital or school where the doctor trained (60 percent)
- The doctor's age (34 percent) and gender (18 percent) are relatively unimportant.

### **Consumer Need for Physician Information:**

While 45 percent of respondents said they would never see a specialist without first checking his or her credentials, the majority of consumers do not check physician qualifications. The survey found:

- 57 percent agreed that it is difficult to find clear, useful information on doctors.
- 58 percent of respondents have never researched a physician online.
- Just under a third (31 percent) ask questions about the doctor's qualifications and just 28 percent research the doctor's qualifications before making an appointment.
- 23 percent said they have checked to see if a doctor has been sued for malpractice or disciplined by a regulatory board; only 5 percent have paid for a report on a physician.

### **Awareness and Understanding of Board Certification:**

Consumers said that board certification is "very important" or "important" in choosing a doctor (91 percent of respondents), yet few actually know what it means. In an unaided question, only 20 percent of respondents gave an answer that mentioned passing a test or an exam.

- 60 percent of respondents incorrectly answered "true" to the statement: "A doctor must be board certified to practice medicine."
- After being told what board certification is, 88 percent said board certification is important to them and 73 percent said they would care if they knew their doctor had let his/her certification expire.
- Only 45 percent of respondents said they had checked to see if a doctor is board certified.

### **Survey Population**

The survey was conducted among more than 1,000 U.S. adults, with results weighted by age, gender, race and region to ensure a representative sample. The margin of error for results based on that total survey is plus or minus four percentage points. The survey participants were:

- 1,009 consumers (503 male and 506 female)
- 18 years of age or older, living in private households in the continental United States
- Ethnic background: 812 white (non-Hispanic), 76 black (non-Hispanic) and 61 Hispanic (any race)
- Nine percent who work in the medical profession as a doctor, nurse or other professional

### **About ABMS**

Now in its 75<sup>th</sup> year, American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) is the preeminent medical organization overseeing physician certification in the United States. The not-for-profit organization consists of 24 Member Boards that certify physicians in more than 145 medical specialties and subspecialties, including nearly 85 percent of all licensed physicians in the United States. ABMS supports its Member Boards in their efforts to develop and implement educational and professional standards for the evaluation and certification of physician specialists. The 24

## ABMS Consumer Survey Fact Sheet

Member Boards that make up the ABMS Board Enterprise covers more than 145 medical specialties and subspecialties include: American Board of Allergy and Immunology, American Board of Anesthesiology, American Board of Colon and Rectal Surgery, American Board of Dermatology, American Board of Emergency Medicine, American Board of Family Medicine, American Board of Internal Medicine, American Board of Medical Genetics, American Board of Neurological Surgery, American Board of Nuclear Medicine, American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology, American Board of Ophthalmology, American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery, American Board of Otolaryngology, American Board of Pathology, American Board of Pediatrics American Board of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, American Board of Plastic Surgery, American Board of Preventive Medicine, American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, American Board of Radiology, American Board of Surgery, American Board of Thoracic Surgery, and American Board of Urology.

For more information about the American Board of Medical Specialties, or to check the board certification status of an individual physician, consumers can visit the ABMS Web site at [www.abms.org](http://www.abms.org).

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