

# 20 Questions

*you must* **Ask**

*before choosing a*

# Gynecologist



**By:**

**Dr. Lisa Otey**

## ABOUT DR. LISA OTEY



Dr. Lisa P. Otey was raised in Houston and earned her Bachelor of Science at Spelman College while on the Dean's List. She then attended her father's alma mater Meharry Medical College where she obtained her MD degree with honors from the Alpha Omega Alpha Society in 1985 as well as her residency training in Obstetrics and Gynecology in 1989. She then moved back to her hometown in Houston where she received further training in Infertility and Reproductive Endocrinology from the Baylor College of Medicine in 1993. She has been on staff at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital and The Woman's Hospital of Texas while working for Kelsey-Seybold. She has been involved with the Texas Medical Association, the Houston Medical Society, the National Medical Association and the Texas Medical Foundation. In 2009 she left Kelsey-Seybold to join her father in practice. She has been the recipient of the Patient's Choice Award in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

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## 1 ARE YOU ACCEPTING NEW PATIENTS?

This is one of those that seem pretty obvious when you look back but at first it's easy to forget to ask. You may find out from a website that the doctor accepts your insurance and then you ask a friend and they give you a very good report but when you try to make an appointment you find out that the practice is closed to new patients. If you find out that your best candidate is not seeing anyone new, you should then ask who that doctor refers patients to. If you get a doctor to refer you to another one in the same field then chances are “bird of a feather fly together” and your referral doctor has just a good a chance at being your top pick.



When you find a doctor that does accept new patients, make sure she accepts patients LIKE YOU! If you're pregnant, make sure the OBGYN still does deliveries. Many OBGYN doctors have focused their practice to gynecology and no longer provide pregnancy care. If you're pregnant then you need to know this immediately. If you're not pregnant then you may benefit from having an OBGYN that focuses on gynecology. Think about it, your appointments will never be cancelled because of an emergency C-section that the doctor had to run and perform. Your appointment won't get bumped because of a pregnant woman with complications. Many OB doctors don't spend much time on all of the other female related health issues but you wouldn't know unless you asked. So be sure to find out if they accept new patients AND if they can deliver the services that you may need.

## 2 WHAT IS THE AVERAGE WAIT TIME TO GET AN APPOINTMENT?

If you have to wait a week or more to get an appointment to see a doctor that may or may not be an issue right now. It certainly becomes a big issue when you really need the doctor and don't want to go to the Emergency Room. You'll sometimes hear people use a long wait time as a sign of a doctor's popularity. Do we really believe this? The post office has a long wait but does this mean it's very “popular”? It can take weeks to get an appointment at the Social Security Office but that doesn't say much about its popularity. Don't confuse a good doctor with a dysfunctional practice environment. A good doctor can have a very efficiently run practice or a very unproductive practice. Assuming the doctor is good, how long does it take of YOUR time to wait and see her? When you have a problem that needs medical attention, would you rather be seen within 48 hours or be scheduled “sometime next month”? With so many doctors to choose from, pick the best one that also has a short wait time for appointments. You certainly deserve it.

3

### ONCE YOU'RE IN THE OFFICE, WHAT'S THE AVERAGE WAIT TIME TO SEE THE DOCTOR?

You really have to pay attention to how the staff or doctor answers this question. If they give a straightforward answer like “it usually takes no more than 10 minutes” then it probably takes no more than 15 minutes. If you get a really long answer to such a short question explaining all the ways that the wait can be longer than expected then expect that you need to bring a book! The national average for the wait time in doctor’s offices was 22 minutes in 2009. This is an average of all specialties around the country. Your results may vary! Don’t



just ask the front receptionist, ask the nurse and then ask the doctor. Look for consistency. If you get wildly different answers then you can be sure that someone doesn’t know what they’re talking about and do you want that person handling your medical records? Seriously, a well-run machine produces consistent results. A dysfunctional clinic can have days that are grueling and days that are very smooth. Just remember that even a broken clock is right twice a day! A day or two or three that a doctor’s office runs smoothly does not mean that is what you should expect. Ask the question and then wait. Sometimes there is more information in HOW a question is answered. . You can also check some online resources like [www.HealthGrades.com](http://www.HealthGrades.com). Patients can give feedback on their experiences with the office and doctor. Many doctors have no reviews so it may not always help you but it’s worth a look.

4

### HOW ARE EMERGENCIES HANDLED?

The time to find out how your potential doctor and staff handle your emergencies is BEFORE they happen. Will the doctor see you the same day in the office? How often does he send his patients to the Emergency Room? Does the doctor seem to have a very hands on approach or a hands off approach? Does the doctor have hospital privileges at the local hospitals? If you need to be admitted will your doctor admit you or is that assigned to the on-call doctor in the ER? If you leave a message how soon should you expect a call back? What happens on the weekends and after hours? It’s better to know what to expect before it happens.



## 5 WHICH HOSPITALS DOES THE DOCTOR USE?

The delivery of medical care has become more complex over the years. Doctors used to see all of their patients in the hospital. But then again there were only one or two hospitals in town so “making rounds” was pretty straightforward. There are over 5000 registered hospitals in the United States. There are more than 100 hospitals and medical centers in the Greater Houston area for example. A doctor that has a large practice can easily have patients check in to 5 or 6 different hospitals in just their local area. As a consequence, many doctors limit the number of hospitals to which they have privileges. You can’t just assume that your doctor will be available to see you at your local hospital.



Some doctors also choose to focus their attention on their clinic patients and therefore they no longer see their patients in the hospital. If they require admission then another doctor will admit their patients. Some doctors make arrangements with specific doctor groups while others have no arrangement. You need to ask what happens to you if you need to be admitted. Will the doctor admit you, will a colleague admit you or will you need to go to the local ER and have an on-call OBGYN doctor admit you.

## 6 DO THEY ACCEPT MY INSURANCE?

OK so you have insurance and you’re looking for a doctor. You’ve done all kinds of research and talked to your friends and you’re excited to finally find someone you might like. Then comes the bad news...she doesn’t take YOUR insurance. But you thought having insurance would make things so much easier? Well it is certainly easier than NOT having insurance but you need to know who takes your plan. The devil is in the details. Knowing that you have BlueCross isn’t enough. BlueCross, like most insurance plans, has several varieties. There is the PPO, HMO, indemnity, Medicare supplements, etc. Find out your specific type of plan and ask the front office or visit their website to find out.



Also find out if the doctor is “in network” or “out of network”. If this doctor is “in network” this means that the doctor agreed to be listed as a BlueCross provider for example and will take a discounted reimbursement in exchange for getting access to a large database of patients. An “out of network” doctor does not have this arrangement and you will end up paying more money out of pocket seeing a doctor out of network.

### **7 WHEN IS PAYMENT EXPECTED?**

The best relationships can be uprooted by the way money is handled. You can expect to pay your insurance co-pay at the time the service is rendered but what if you fall behind? What if you rushed out and forgot? How does the office handle these often sticky situations? Will you be charged for a missed appointment? What forms of payment are accepted? Not everyone will take checks but did you know that not all will take cash? To accept cash requires having enough cash on hand to give change. The number of cash transactions may be so small that it doesn't make sense for the practice to keep a large amount of cash on hand. Just ask!

### **8 WHAT IS THE APPOINTMENT CANCELLATION POLICY?**

You may be surprised to find out that some practices will charge you a fee for cancelling an appointment. If the appointment is cancelled at least a few days before then most will not levy a charge but if you call an hour before thinking you are doing them a favor then think again! You may get a \$25 bill. This also applies for “no shows”. You don't want to ruin a potentially good relationship just because you didn't know their policy. Then again, if you don't want to even think about penalties then you can certainly find doctors that don't use these office tactics.

### **9 HOW ARE LAB RESULTS HANDLED?**

Doctors will often have a few labs available in the office but many will need to be performed at an outside lab. When those results come back will they call you, fax you, mail you or just leave you wondering what happened? No news may be good news in some circles but in medicine it could mean someone dropped the ball and you are the worse off for it! Find out how negative results are handled. Some practices will only call for positive results while others call for all results. Can you call to get the results? Because of current privacy laws (HIPPA), medical information is protected and cannot be released without your prior authorization. What is the turnaround time for most labs?

## 10 WHEN X-RAYS OR LABS ARE NEEDED, WHERE ARE THEY PERFORMED?

Just the same way the doctor can be in network, so can the lab and x-ray facility. You should also check the labs and x-ray facility that the doctor uses to see if they are in network. If not, you can still get your labs done at an in-network facility. Your doctor does not need any special contract with the lab or x-ray group to order tests. You are the one footing the bill (along with your insurance carrier) so you should have a choice on where it is performed.



## 11 WHAT HAPPENS IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT MY CARE AND I CALL THE OFFICE? HOW SOON SHOULD I EXPECT A CALL BACK?

Some practices will have a nurse to call all patients back who have questions while with others, the doctor makes those calls. Unfortunately some practices do not have an aggressive call back program and patients can feel left out when their concerns are not addressed or they are told to make another appointment to get help. You should expect a call back the same day to answer your concerns.



## 12 WHAT'S THE PROCEDURE IF I NEED ASSISTANCE OUTSIDE OF OFFICE HOURS?

Murphy's Law in medicine states that if you get sick, it will be after hours. And when that does happen, who can you call? Will you get an answering machine that offers you no guidance on what to expect? Will you get an answering service that will page the doctor? Again, the best time to ask these questions is before you get sick. How long should you wait to get a response before calling again? When should you go to the Emergency Room?

## 13 WHO COVERS WHEN THE DOCTOR IS OUT OF TOWN OR UNAVAILABLE?

Does the doctor have someone who takes care of her patients when she's unavailable? The doctors who cover will not know your case like your doctor does but this won't mean he can't take care of your immediate needs. If there is a covering doctor, does he communicate with your doctor if you had a problem?



## 14 HOW MUCH TIME CAN I EXPECT FROM AN OFFICE VISIT?

We've all been there. You get shuffled in, wait forever, get seen by the doctor for what seemed like a minute or two and then you're hurried out and left with your head spinning. It's not until you get to the car that you realize that you had some questions but it all happened so fast. So how much time can you expect with the doctor? The best answer probably is "as long as it takes" so that your concerns are addressed. Some office visits are quick simply because it is routine and there isn't much going on to discuss but do you have the opportunity to have a longer visit during a "routine" visit if you need it?

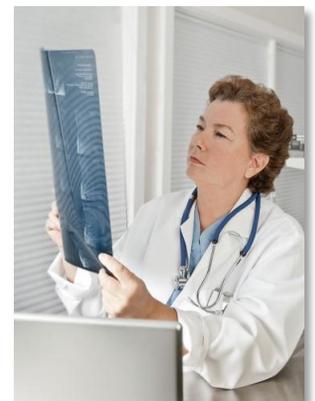
## 15 ARE YOU BOARD CERTIFIED?

Board certification involves a rigorous process of testing and peer evaluation that is designed and administered by specialists in the specific area of medicine. Doctors that are fresh out of residency are not yet board certified but are likely "board eligible" which means that they meet the criteria that allows them to take the boards. In order to maintain board certification, doctors must continually demonstrate continued education in the field and be re-tested every several years. If a doctor is well out of residency and not board certified then that should raise a red flag. Did they fail the re-certification test? Did they fail to keep up with the continuing education requirements? The American Board of Medical Specialists has a [website](#) where you can check the certification status of a doctor. In Texas, the state [medical board](#) has a section detailing where the doctor has hospital privileges as well as other information such as medical school and residency training. For gynecologist, the certifying board is the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology ([www.abog.org](http://www.abog.org)).



## 16 WHAT EXPERIENCE DO YOU HAVE WITH MY PARTICULAR DISEASE?

Let's face it. The days of your doctor treating every disease in the book are over. The truth of the matter is that doctors are like everyone else. The more experience you have in a particular area, the better you are in that area. Over time, you focus on your strengths. Doctors are no different. Some doctors will get known as the "go to" doc for problem X and so they get more and more referrals for that problem. Don't be surprised if your doctor candidate does not have a lot of experience with your particular problem even if it falls within the specialty of gynecology or obstetrics. Don't assume that OBGYN



doctors treat your particular condition. For example, infertility evaluations are done by OBGYN doctors but few will do this type of evaluation. Some receive further training in reproductive endocrinology and infertility. This additional training helps them dive deeper into the complexities that surround this difficult issue.

### **17** WHAT IS THE REFERRAL PROCESS LIKE WITH OTHER SPECIALISTS?

Does the doctor refer a lot of patients or very few patients? If you need a referral, are the other doctors close by or across town? What types of problems get referred to specialists? If the list of reasons to refer is a long list, you may consider moving on to another doctor. Sure everyone needs to refer to a colleague or specialist but when it seems like every other condition needs a referral then this doc may not be particularly keen on treating you.

### **18** DO YOU USE NURSE PRACTITIONERS OR PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS?

It often happens in a larger practice that you see someone other than your doctor. You naturally assume that it's just one of her colleagues. She walks in the room, introduces herself and begins the evaluation. It's not until later that you realize that this was not a doctor. For a lot of people that's not an issue at all since most office visits are fairly routine like bladder infections or yeast infections. But some people prefer to only see a doctor because of the advanced training and skill level. To each her own but you should know who you could potentially see as a provider so as not to be surprised down the road. Mid-level providers can be physician assistants or advanced nurse practitioners. They often provide a valuable function in an office setting by seeing patients with minor problems thereby allowing the doctor to spend more time with more complex cases. But since their training is not as extensive as the doctor's then there is a chance your problem might not be treated as accurately especially if the signs or symptoms are subtle. This does come down to a personal preference. The [Texas Board of Medical Examiners](#) has a section showing whether or not a doctor is supervising any physician assistants or nurse practitioners.

### **19** WHAT DOES THE DOCTOR EXPECT FROM HER PATIENTS?

You might be surprised to realize that doctors may have varying expectations from their patients. Some will expect you to follow every direction of theirs exactly without question while others expect you to figure it out and everything in between! Your would-be doctor may be pleasantly surprised to hear you ask what is expected of you patient. You should get a good

sense of his personality when he tells you what he expects of you. Authoritarian, obsessive, paternalistic, big sis approach.....you name it. If your potential doc is a control freak just like you then you'll bang heads and it will hurt. It needs to be a match.

## 20

### HOW WOULD YOU GAUGE THE DOCTOR'S BEDSIDE MANNER?

At times it seems as though bedside manners are a dying art but not too many doctors today. They relish in providing comfort at the bedside. But remember this, if they don't comfort you in the seat in their office they probably won't provide much comfort when you really need it when you're sick in a bed. People really don't change much so if the office visit is cold, the hospital visit will be the same and so will the next office visit and so on. Everyone has a bad day granted but how about a bad year? Ask around specifically about what patients say about her bedside manners. You don't want the doctor's opinion about her own temperament but other patients. If you don't know any of her patients then ask the nurse and ask the front receptionist. If you ask the nurse and she just starts on a non-stop deluge of stories about how wonderful the doctor is then you have your answer, at least from that one source. If the response is guarded, slow with a deliberate choice of words then beware!

### Website Resources

A little web research can go a long way. I've listed a few website already mentioned as well as new ones to help you search for the "right doctor".

[www.HealthGrades.com](http://www.HealthGrades.com)

This site allows you to select a doctor based on several criteria such as specialty, location by zip code which includes a search by the number of miles from that zip code, insurance accepted, gender, and language spoken. You can then compare several doctors side by side. You can also see the ratings that other patients have left.

[www.Vitals.com](http://www.Vitals.com)

This site has a bit more information although you can't do a direct side by side comparison of doctors. You can view the hospital affiliations, awards, professional societies, and education. You can also leave a review and read reviews from past patients.

[www.RateMDs.com](http://www.RateMDs.com)

Not a very fancy or exhaustive site but it gets the basics of a doctor review. There are only four areas reviewed: staff, punctuality, helpfulness and knowledge. Not an in depth review but it does give you a chance to see other people's opinions that aren't mentioned in other review sites. It can be useful to round out your search.

[www.Yelp.com](http://www.Yelp.com)

This is a social review site that reviews everything from taco stands to car repair shops to doctors. Yes, doctors provide a service just like everyone else and get reviewed like everyone else! You will have to go to the top menu bar under "Find Reviews" and then on the next screen look at the right side for "Categories" and choose "Health and Medical" and then refine the search on the next page under "Doctors". Or you could just type in a doctor's name on the home page and zip code. Just be aware that your doctor may not be listed. If you like the social review sites and your doctor is not listed you can go next to.....

[www.AngiesList.com](http://www.AngiesList.com)

Angie's List is well known for reviews of local businesses. Unlike Yelp, Angie's List is a paid service. If you are the kind of person who likes to know the scoop from other consumers then it may be worthwhile to get a paid subscription.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of questions but it should help you feel a bit more comfortable in choosing a gynecologist. If you are in the Houston area and would like to talk more, feel free to call or drop by for a visit. You can visit my website at [www.GreaterHoustonGYN.com](http://www.GreaterHoustonGYN.com) or call me at 713-BEST-GYN/713-237-8496.

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