

5 Questions with Abby Spencer, MD



Dr. Spencer and her husband, Scott Starenchak, MD. The two met during their white coat ceremony at med school.

Hummus, Diet Pepsi and connecting with colleagues and her residents fuel a long workday for Abby Spencer, MD, MS, director of the Internal Medicine Residency Program. “A good debriefing conversation where we really reflect on what worked, what didn’t, and how to build on our strengths invigorates me,” she says. “Seeing, learning and teaching alongside my residents in the clinic and on the wards; watching the lightbulbs go off for them and igniting their curiosity and love for medicine refills my energy bucket. They are such bright and hard-working young doctors. It’s amazing to watch them at the patient bedside.”

Outside of work you might find Dr. Spencer and her family (Scott, a primary care physician at the Solon Family Health Center, and their sons Jonah and Joshua) exploring the Metroparks, enjoying a treat at Mitchell’s or having fun at Chuck E. Cheese’s. Come football season, she’s cheering on her beloved Steelers and still travels “home” to use their season tickets to the Pitt Panthers football games. Although born and raised in Upstate New York, she spent nearly two decades living in Pittsburgh and says one of the best things about finding herself in Cleveland is “how easily we’re able to get Steelers tickets.”

Why you choose to practice at Cleveland Clinic?

It’s where every resident deserves a world-class education! I have the chance to take the residency program from good to great through mentorship, coaching, innovative curriculum design and exceptional clinical care. I believe deeply in the Cleveland Clinic values—they truly resonate with me. It’s an honor to be here to drive our educational mission alongside some of the best clinicians, educators, thinkers and communicators in the world. The general medicine department comprises outstanding primary care docs paving the way in population health, ambulatory QI and care transformation. We have a supportive chair who truly models exceptional patient care right alongside us.

Share a time-saving technology tip you use?

The dictation feature on the iPhone so if I'm driving, I ask Siri to read an email to me or write it as I speak. I have no Epic tricks, but would love to hear ideas from others.



Scott, Joshua, Jonah and Abby on a visit to Niagara Falls Canada.

How do you build meaningful relationships with your patients?

Curiosity, empathy, connection, caring, truly listening to understand, partnering with them and involving them in the education of the next generation of doctors. I think the most important thing is that as a primary care doctor, it's all about the relationships. Getting to know who each patient is as a person and how his/her disease or wellness relates to their world. I am seeing my patients with trainees, so it's meaningful that patients are being a part of educating the next generation of doctors. They can shape the types of physicians, whether as generalists or specialists, that we graduate each year.

How do you decompress from work?

I sing along to musicals very loudly. I like to find poignant quotes to reflect on and share. My two little boys remind me what it's truly all about. Funny movies, a good laugh, jogging and ice cream. And often a good cry when needed.

What keeps you excited about the future of healthcare?

Unbelievable possibility. I think anything is possible and I think this is the place that is going to set the stage for how healthcare is delivered. Innovation is one of Cleveland Clinic's fundamental values and we aren't afraid of change. That makes this an exciting place to come to work and be creative. My graduates are the future of healthcare and I couldn't be any more confident that they will go out and change the world of healthcare for the better!