



“I need to see a doctor!”

How to get the best from your GP Practice

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Additional Roles in GP Practices | 4 |
| Responding to Your Queries | 7 |
| Registering at a GP Practice | 8 |
| Making an Appointment | 9 |
| By telephone | 9 |
| In person | 9 |
| Using Online Health Services | 9 |
| eConsult | 10 |
| NHS App | 10 |
| Access | 13 |
| Enhanced Access | 13 |
| Reasonable Adjustments | 13 |
| Communication | 14 |
| Accessible Information Standards | 14 |
| Comments, Compliments and Complaints | 15 |
| Comments and Compliments | 15 |
| Complaints | 15 |
| Patient Record Keeping | 16 |
| Carers | 17 |
| Patients with Learning Disability and/or Autism | 18 |
| Prescriptions | 19 |
| Use the Right Service | 21 |
| Healthwatch County Durham | 22 |
| Information & Signposting | 22 |
| Contact us | 22 |
| Acknowledgements | 23 |

Introduction

People often contact us about GP appointments, and we get asked:

- How can I get an appointment?
- Who can I see?
- Who are the different professionals working in the GP practice?

We have worked with a range of professionals to gather information in response to questions and issues raised by local people. We cover the most common questions and answers in this document.

QR codes and links in the document are provided for you to find more information. On our printed document scan the QR code, on the digital version click the QR code.

How to scan a QR code

1. Open the camera on your phone or tablet.
2. Focus the camera on the QR code.
3. Gently tap the yellow box that appears on your screen.
4. This will take you to the relevant website for more information.

Before we begin, here are some of the terms we have used in this document:

'Primary Care' describes the first point of contact for health services. These are part of the NHS and include your doctor, pharmacies and more.

Your doctor is often referred to as your General Practitioner or GP. When we talk about **'general practice'**, or **'GP Practice'** we are talking about all the services provided by a your GP surgery and not just the GP.

'Triage' is an assessment of your needs to help find you the right health care professional within primary care. This is usually done over the telephone.

GP Practices have changed over the years. They have had to meet increasing demand and respond to changing health care needs. They have done this by including more specialist roles within their teams – these staff work alongside GPs in general practice and improve the range of services on offer to patients.

Additional Roles in GP Practices

Groups of GP Practices decide what additional roles will benefit their patients. These roles are shared between GP Practices, but not all roles will be available in all practices. This means there will be more choice of health care professionals overall, but your appointment may be offered at a different location from your usual surgery.

Advanced Practitioners

Advanced practitioners can be nurses, pharmacists, paramedics, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dieticians, or podiatrists. They have a wide range of skills and knowledge that increases the offer of support to patients registered with your GP Practice.

Care Coordinators

Care coordinators are personalised care professionals who act as a central point of contact. They work closely with the practice team to make sure that appropriate support is made available to the patient and their carers and ensure that their changing needs are addressed.

Health and Wellbeing Coaches

Health and wellbeing coaches predominately use health coaching skills to support people to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to manage existing issues. They work with people, offering coaching and motivation to implement personalised health and care plans.

Social Prescribing Link Workers

Social prescribing link workers connect people to community groups and agencies for practical and emotional support.

Clinical Pharmacists

Clinical pharmacists work in the GP Practices in a patient facing role to clinically assess and treat patients. They work with and alongside the general practice team, taking responsibility for patients with chronic diseases. Some pharmacists can also prescribe and manage prescriptions.

Pharmacy Technicians

Pharmacy technicians complement the work of clinical pharmacists, and where appropriate, advise patients and members of the workforce.

First Contact Physiotherapists

First contact practitioner physiotherapists can assess, diagnose, treat, and manage musculoskeletal problems and undifferentiated conditions. They can be accessed directly by patients, or via referral from other members of the practice team.



Paramedic

A paramedic in the GP Practice can provide a rapid response to deteriorating patients and patients with long-term conditions, minor injuries, and minor illness. They can also supply a range of medicines and support patients who require wound care, have fallen, have musculoskeletal problems, and have urinary tract or respiratory infections.

Cancer Care Co-ordinators

These roles can help improve the uptake of cancer screening programmes and patient experience by providing personalised care planning and support throughout the cancer pathway, and supporting the delivery of cancer requirements.

Dietitians

Dietitians diagnose and treat dietary and nutritional problems. They work in a variety of settings with patients of all ages, to support changes to food intake to address diabetes, food allergies, coeliac disease, and metabolic diseases.

Nursing Associates

Nursing associates deliver hands-on, person-centred care. Their roles include performing and recording clinical observations (for example, blood pressure, temperature, respirations, and pulse), and performing clinical health checks.

Podiatrists

Podiatrists have been trained to diagnose and treat foot and lower limb conditions. They provide assessment, evaluation, and foot care for patients.

Mental Health Practitioners

Mental health practitioners support adults whose needs cannot be met by local talking therapies, but who may not need ongoing care from secondary mental health services.

They will act as bridge between primary care and secondary mental health services and can facilitate onward referral to a range of services to meet patients' needs.

Mental health practitioners for children and young people can support early identification, as well as intervention to more targeted or intensive support and interventions as part of a joined-up approach with community mental health services.

Physician Associates

Physician associates are healthcare professionals, with a generalist clinical education, who work alongside GPs. They provide care for a patient from the initial appointment through to diagnosis, treatment, and evaluation. They cannot prescribe medication, but they can prepare prescriptions for GPs to sign.

General Practice Assistants

General practice assistants deliver a combination of routine administrative tasks and some basic clinical duties. Their focus is on managing patients and providing administrative support.

Digital and Transformation Leads

Digital and transformation leads support increased access to care for patients, through the adoption of new technology and other initiatives.

For further information about these roles please scan or click this QR code:





Responding to Your Queries

“Why should I tell the receptionist what my problem is?”

Reception staff may also be called Care Navigators. It may seem as though they are asking questions they don't need to know about, or being nosy! But they are trained to take information to help book the best appointment for you, with the most appropriate person. Sometimes, the GP might not be the best person to deal with your health issue. Receptionists have access to the range of health care professionals and services in GP Practices, and you can help get the best appointment by providing as much information as you can (whether this is over the phone or using an online service). Your information will be treated professionally and confidentially, to arrange an appointment with the person most suitable to deal with your query. However, you can still request an appointment with your GP if you prefer. If this is your preference, this may mean a longer wait for an appointment.

Registering at a Practice

What we hear from the public:

“I don't have a fixed address, so how can I register with a doctor?”

Anyone in England can register for free at a GP Practice and you don't need to have a fixed address.

Scan or click this QR code to find out more about how to register with a GP Practice:



Scan or click this QR code to find a GP Practice:



If you have problems registering with a GP:

- Call the NHS England Customer Contact Centre on 0300 311 2233
- Or contact Healthwatch County Durham healthwatchcountydurham@pcp.uk.net

Making an Appointment

What we hear from the public:

“I can't get through to my GP Practice by telephone”

There are now more ways to make an appointment. These include:

Using Online Health Services

All GP Practices have online/digital access, but different practices may use different systems.

Online systems allow you to:

- Book / cancel / review appointments.
- Request repeat prescriptions.
- Access parts of your health records including test results, vaccinations, appointment records and communications between your GP and other health services such as hospitals.

You are also able to request access to your full GP records online.

Digital services are generally for people who don't need urgent face-to-face appointments. Photos can be uploaded to help the practitioner identify what course of action to take or decide whether they need to see you in person.

If the information you submit into the electronic system indicates the possibility of something more serious, you will be instructed by the system to get urgent or emergency care. The system may also signpost you to self-care or alternative services e.g. pharmacy, if those are more appropriate.

Two of the more common systems are:

eConsult

This online system takes the patient, or their representative, through a series of questions about the symptoms or condition and the information is sent directly to the GP Practice. The GP Practice will review this information and respond accordingly. eConsult may at times be turned off by your practice or limited (for example in line with opening hours) to help with the management of patient submissions.

SystemOnline

SystemOnline gives access to a patients' healthcare records, enables the booking of appointments and the management of medication.

If your GP Practice uses this platform, you will need to tell your practice reception team that you would like to use it. You will usually need to provide ID and your practice will supply you with a personal username and password details. This service uses a practice capping function which means the number of available appointments per day is entered into the system.

By telephone

Some patients prefer to contact their practice by telephone, and phone lines can be extremely busy. When the need is urgent, the patient or their representative will want to call as soon as possible on a morning (8am–9am) but this is one of the busiest times. You will usually have to wait in a queue. If you don't need an urgent appointment, it may be best to try phoning later in the day when the lines are less busy.

Some practices state preferred times for things like test results or prescription requests, so find out your practice guidelines and try to phone during the times given. This frees up phone lines during busy times when people are trying to book urgent appointments.

In person

You can walk into GP Practices and speak directly to reception staff who can help with your query.

NHS App

All patients can sign up to the App without having to request this through the GP Practice. This gives the patient access to their healthcare records, management of appointments and medication, and provides health information and advice.

Scan or click the QR code for more information about the range of digital services.

You will need access to a computer, tablet, or Smart Phone for digital

healthcare access. You

can also contact your local Healthwatch for information (contact details are at the back of this resource).



Self-referral

You may be able to self-refer to local services including mental health, physio and more. Information may be found on the practice website. Alternatively, reception staff may be able to provide this information over the phone. Try calling on an afternoon when phone lines may not be as busy.

What we hear from the public:

“How long will I wait for an appointment?”

If your need is urgent, most practices will provide 'same day' appointments. If an urgent appointment can't be provided you may be advised to call 111, or to go to an urgent care centre or A&E. If your need isn't urgent, you will be offered an appointment at another time. This is sometimes referred to as a pre bookable or routine appointment.

It is important to remember that general practice is not an emergency service. You should call 999 in an emergency.

What we hear from the public:

“If I'm not sure I need an appointment, what else could I do?”

Your local pharmacy can help with many health problems such as sore throats, coughs, colds, urinary tract infections (UTIs) and routine aches and pains. You can visit them directly or ask for advice over the phone.

If you are unsure about what you might need, your GP practice team can advise you. They will tell you if you need to speak to a doctor or another health practitioner or help you find out if your need could be more urgent.

You could also visit 111 online (find out more by scanning or clicking this QR code) or use the eConsultation service on your practice's website for more self-help guidance.



Scan or click this QR code to access A-Z of conditions, symptoms and treatments and your NHS account.



If your need is urgent and your GP Practice has no more appointments available that day, you may be advised to call 111. If your needs are not urgent you should be offered an alternative appointment.

What we hear from the public:

“Why is my appointment not face-to-face?”

All practices will give you a face-to-face appointment when your health condition needs assessing in person and one is available. You may be offered a telephone or video appointment first, because it may be the quickest way to get you the care you need. If you prefer face-to-face, please tell the practice team; and make sure you let them know if a face to face appointment makes it easier for you to communicate – for example, if you have hearing difficulties.

What we hear from the public:

“I no longer need my appointment, what should I do?”

If you cannot make your appointment or no longer need it, please contact the practice to cancel it as soon as you can. Many practices have the ability for patients to cancel appointments via text message or via the surgery online system. Appointments that are cancelled are offered to someone else who needs it, rather than the appointment being wasted.

In April 2024 there were 12,650 ‘DNA’ appointments in County Durham – these are appointments where the patient did not attend and did not cancel.

Making an Appointment

Enhanced Access

Enhanced Access offers appointments between 6.30pm and 8pm weekdays and between 9am and 5pm Saturdays. Enhanced Access appointments can be booked through your GP Practice, but the appointment may not be at a different practice.

What we hear from the public:

“When I get through to the practice, why are there no appointments left?”

GP Practices can only safely provide a certain number of appointments per day depending on the staff they have available. Each practice will decide how those appointments are given throughout the day to ensure there is a mix of same day and pre-bookable appointments.

The NHS has made some recent changes to increase the number of appointments available to include weekday evenings and Saturday appointments, to help meet demand. This is called ‘Enhanced Access’.

Reasonable Adjustments

Reasonable adjustments are things that need to be in place for an individual to have equal access to healthcare. They are sometimes referred to as personalised services because they should be tailored to a person's specific needs.

If you have specific needs or develop specific needs that require adjustments, it is best to discuss these with your GP Practice as soon as possible. Do this before you need an appointment, so the practice can make the necessary adjustments in advance.

Reasonable adjustments can include interpreters, hearing loops, sign language, physical adaptations, changing places etc. They can also include changes to the way appointments are usually delivered such as longer appointments, quiet spaces and supported means of communication.



Communication

What we hear from the public:

“How might the practice communicate with me?”

GP Practices communicate via letters or telephone calls, through the NHS App or the online consultation system on their website. Text messages are often used to share important information and appointment reminders. Please ensure all your contact details, including name, address, and telephone numbers, are correct, are kept up to date and that the practice knows your preferred method of communication.

GP Practice notice boards, social media and websites are also used to communicate information to patients.

Accessible Information Standard

All organisations that provide health or care services must work within the Accessible Information Standard framework by law. This means your health or care provider must find out what your communication needs are and meet them. Scan or click the QR code to find out more about the Accessible Information Standard.



What we hear from the public:

“How do I give feedback?”

All GP Practices have a website with details of how to contact them. Direct email addresses for your practice are not usually given out to patients.

Many practices will have a suggestion box in reception areas for feedback.

Ensure you share your views on NHS annual patient surveys or any practice surveys you are invited to complete.

All practices have patient participation groups and welcome new members. Ask at reception for details if you would like to become involved and help improve service delivery and patient experience for yourself and others.

Comments, Compliments and Complaints

All GP Practices have a Comments, Compliments and Complaints process.

Comments and Compliments

It is important for practices to know what works well. Please tell your GP Practice what they are doing well, or if something they did was particularly helpful, let them know so they can try to do more of this for you and for others.

Complaints

Healthwatch County Durham have information about how to make a complaint and you can find out more by scanning or clicking this QR code.



North East Independent Complaints Advocacy Service can also help support you to make a complaint. For further information about ICA, please scan or click this QR code.



All GP Practices will have a complaints process and you can get this information by contacting them directly or on their website. If you have concerns, it is usually best to try to resolve your problem directly with the practice by speaking to a member of the practice management team. If you are not satisfied with the response, you can then take the matter further.

<https://www.carersfederation.co.uk/services/independent-complaints-advocacy/locations/north-east-ica/>

Patient Record Keeping

What we hear from the public:

“How do I know that my records are correct and up to date, and that my information is properly shared with other health providers?”

There are strict national guidelines for the upkeep and sharing of patient records. All GP Practices have policies and procedures in place to ensure patient records are kept up to date, including records of clinical and non-clinical consultations and any actions undertaken. The policies and procedures also cover how and when information is shared with other health providers to ensure patients receive the care they need.

You can access your health records by using online services such as the NHS App or by speaking to your GP Practice. Scan or click the QR code to find out more information about accessing your NHS health records.



Carers

What we hear from the public:

“I can’t register as a carer at my practice because the person I care for doesn’t go to the same doctor.”

Registering as a carer is about supporting your own health and wellbeing needs. The person you care for doesn’t need to be a patient at the same GP Practice for you to register as a carer at your own. Scan or click this QR code to find out more information.



All GP Practices hold a Carers Register for unpaid carers. Practices in the our area are being encouraged to become carer friendly. This means they should:

- Use NHS carers quality markers to improve services.
- Use carers’ passports to personalise services based on individual needs using.
- Actively seek hidden carers.
- Undergo training and appoint carer ambassadors within the practice.

Some practices have carer noticeboards, carer engagement events, and specified carer appointments.

If you provide unpaid care for someone, even if it is a family member, it is important that you register yourself as a carer at your GP Practice. You can do this by speaking to the practice management team or visiting reception. Alternatively, you can access a form by scanning or clicking this QR code to be completed and handed in at your GP Practice.



It is important for you to consider if the person you care for requires you to be involved in their care and health decisions. If they do and you require access to their health records, prior formal consent is needed. Practice staff cannot divulge confidential information without express consent recorded in the patient record. You may also be interested in applying for Lasting Power of Attorney for health and care, for the person you care for which you can find out more about by scanning or clicking this QR code.



For more information about local unpaid carers support services, carers rights etc please scan or click this QR code.



<https://dccarers.org/>

Patients with a Learning Disability

Your practice should offer an Annual Health Check (AHC) to all patients aged 14+ with a learning disability. If you have a learning disability or care for somebody who does, make sure the GP Practice is aware of this because not everyone may be on the practice's Learning Disability register. To find out more about this, scan or click the QR code.



Young people between 14 and 25 often do not go for an Annual Health Check. These invitations are important, because people with learning disabilities can sometimes not realise they are unwell, or find it hard to tell people about their health problems. People with a learning disability often have poorer physical and mental health than the general population, as well as reduced life expectancy due to treatable and preventable ill health.

An AHC is an ideal opportunity to discuss any concerns you may have about your health and wellbeing, and to get checks, vaccines, screening, treatments and health advice. A Health Action Plan should be provided as part of this process, which details your personal health and wellbeing plan going forward. For easy read information about AHCs please scan or click this QR code.



Although GP Practices will provide an AHC for those who have a Learning Disability *and* Autism, there is no requirement to provide AHCs for autistic people without learning disability. However, if you are autistic, or care for someone who is, you can have this flagged on the patient records and ensure the practice is aware of any reasonable adjustments needed.

“Not all people who have a learning disability are on their practice's Learning Disability register. If you are unsure, speak to your practice about registration and ask about Annual Health Checks and Health Action Plans.”

“When making an appointment, whether this be for an AHC or not, mention the person's learning disability/autism as you can be offered a longer appointment, and any other reasonable adjustments that are needed.”

Prescriptions

What we hear from the public:

“What is the best way to order prescriptions?”

Repeat prescriptions can be ordered via the NHS App, your patient online account or your GP Practice website. However, if you do not have access to the internet then some surgeries have dedicated prescription telephone lines. Many practices also have a prescription request box in their reception areas. To find out more about this, please scan or click the QR code.



It is important that you order your medication at least a week before you need it. This will allow enough time for your GP Practice to process your request as well as time for the pharmacy to order your medication if required. It ensures you get your medication when you need it, so you do not run out. You do not normally need an appointment unless advised otherwise.



What we hear from the public:

“How do I get the medications or medical aids that are prescribed for me?”

Prescriptions are sent electronically from your GP Practice to a community pharmacy. To find out how you can nominate a specific community pharmacy to collect your prescriptions from please scan or click the QR code.



Repeat prescriptions are regularly reviewed and your GP Practice may ask to discuss this with you. Community pharmacies can not make any changes to prescriptions, so if you think your prescription is wrong, or you have any queries, you need to speak to your GP practice.

You can speak to community pharmacies directly for more information about the specific treatments and services they offer as each one can differ or, scan or click this QR code to find out where your local community pharmacies are.



Community pharmacies can supply most medications if you need them in an emergency outside of GP Practice hours. Scan or click this QR code to find out how you may do this depending on your circumstances.



Some medications or suitable alternatives may be cheaper when bought over the counter so do discuss this at your community pharmacy.

We hope you find this document informative and use it as a resource to access information when required. All the online links are from reputable sources, which are updated as necessary. If you are unable to use the QR codes, please contact Healthwatch County Durham who will provide you with the relevant information.

Finding the Right Service



Self Care

Care for yourself at home

Minor cuts & grazes Minor bruises
Minor sprains Coughs and colds



Pharmacy

Local expert advice

Minor illnesses Headaches
Stomach upsets Bites & stings



NHS 111

Non-emergency help

Feeling unwell? Unsure? Anxious?
Need help?



GP Advice

Out of hours call 111

Persistent symptoms Chronic pain
Long term conditions New prescriptions



UTCs

Urgent Treatment Centres

Breaks & sprains X-rays
Cuts & grazes Fever & rashes



A&E or 999

For emergencies only

Choking Chestpain | Blacking out
Serious blood loss

Healthwatch County Durham

Contact us



Call:

FREEPHONE 0800 3047039

We are open between 9am – 5pm Monday to Thursday and 9am – 4:30pm on Friday.



Email: healthwatchcountydurham@pcp.uk.net



Post:

Healthwatch County Durham

Whitfield House

St John's Road

Meadowfield Industrial Estate

DH7 8XL



Acknowledgements

Our thanks to the members of the public who have shared their experiences with us and to partner organisations for their support in creating this resource, including: Cleveland Local Medical Committee (CLMC), MIND – Primary Care Link Worker (Carer Support), NHS Digital Services NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board, South Tees Health Improvement Group – Learning Disability and Autism, and Tees Local Pharmaceutical Committee.

We are also grateful to the NENC Healthwatch network for championing the resource and supporting the production of the template for circulation with wider Healthwatch organisations so that this resource can be used to benefit other local areas.

Thanks in particular to Healthwatch South Tees for the initial research and coordination of information for the “I need to see a Doctor” GP access resource. Healthwatch South Tees is the operating name for Healthwatch Middlesbrough and Healthwatch Redcar & Cleveland. Healthwatch South Tees is delivered by Pioneering Care Partnership (PCP). Pioneering Care Partnership is registered in England as a charitable company limited by guarantee.

Registered address: Pioneering Care Partnership, Carer’s Way, Newton Aycliffe, DL5 4SF

Registered charity number: 1067888

VAT No: 708168037

Website: www.pcp.uk.net

© Pioneering Care Partnership (PCP). All rights reserved. You may not copy, reproduce, distribute, publish, display, perform, modify, create derivative works, transmit, this leaflet without consent from PCP. Please contact marketing@pcp.uk.net for consent and a copy of the template document.

You can also get involved with us

<https://www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk/get-involved>



<https://www.facebook.com/healthwatchcountydurham>



<https://www.linkedin.com/company/healthwatch-co-durham/>



<https://twitter.com/HWCCountyDurham>



<https://www.instagram.com/healthwatchcodurham/>