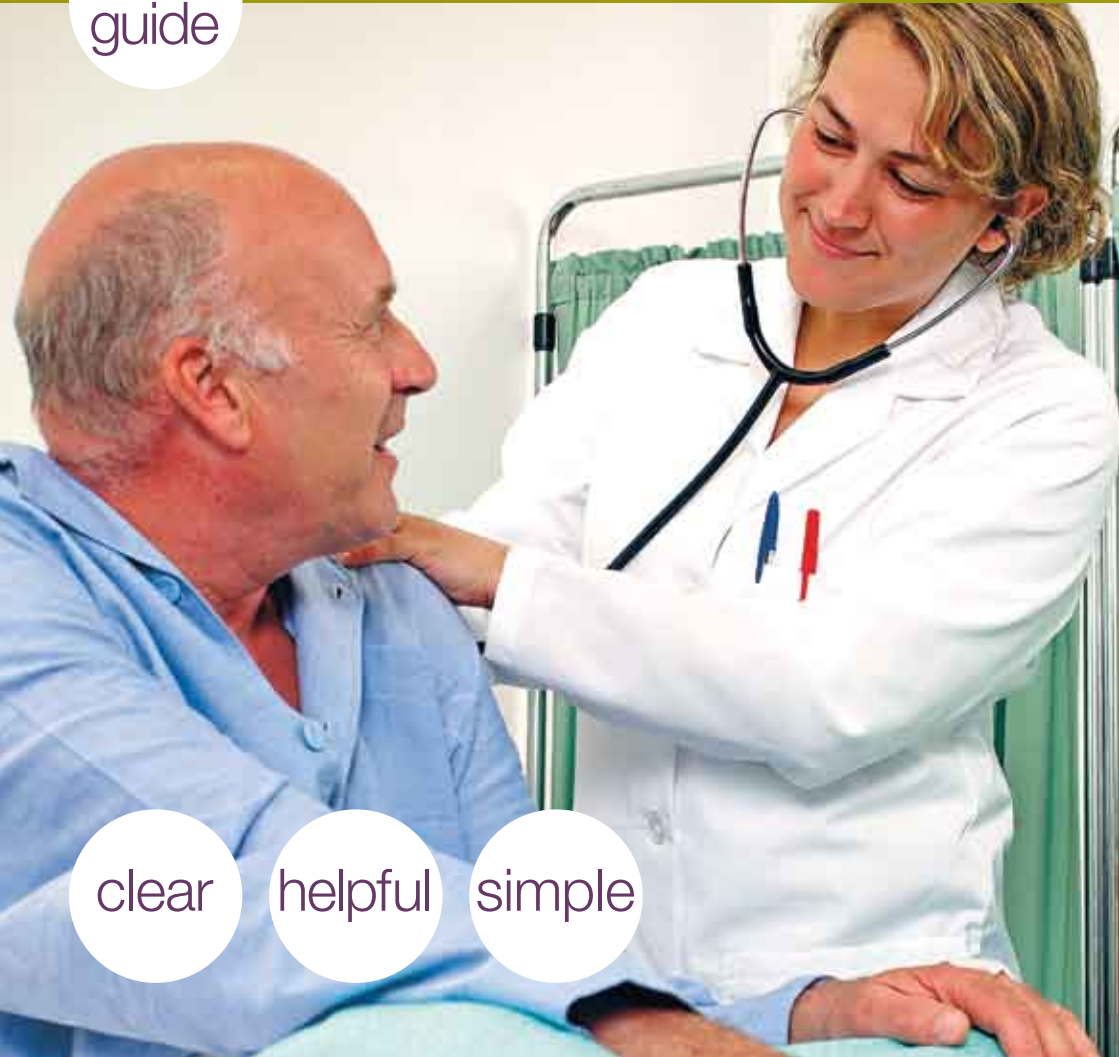


# Your health services

free  
guide



clear

helpful

simple

# Contents

<b>page 3</b>	Introduction
<b>4</b>	Getting help when you are feeling unwell
<b>4</b>	Make the most of your local pharmacist
<b>4</b>	Visit an NHS walk-in centre
<b>5</b>	Call NHS Direct
<b>6</b>	Accident and Emergency departments and minor injuries units
<b>7</b>	Your local GP practice
<b>8</b>	Deciding on treatment
<b>8</b>	Flu vaccinations
<b>9</b>	Getting the most from your medicines
<b>11</b>	Continence problems
<b>11</b>	Chiropody
<b>12</b>	Help to stop smoking
<b>12</b>	Screening for breast cancer and other cancers
<b>13</b>	Hearing difficulties
<b>13</b>	Optical services
<b>14</b>	Dentistry
<b>14</b>	NHS dental charges
<b>15</b>	Help with health costs
<b>16</b>	Getting involved in your local area
<b>16</b>	Compliments and complaints
<b>17</b>	Useful organisations
<b>20</b>	What should I do now?

Age Concern provides information free for older people, their families and those who work with them. If you would like to make a donation to support our work please visit [www.ageconcern.org.uk](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk)

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This guide is not a comprehensive statement of the law in this subject and Age Concern cannot give individual legal or financial advice.

The information in this guide describes the situation in England.

Different rules may apply in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Some rules may have changed since the publication of this guide.

If you have any queries which this guide does not answer, seek further advice from one of the organisations suggested.

# Introduction

There are lots of ways you can get help when you are ill, or when you need advice about your health. You can consult pharmacists, GPs, walk-in centres and telephone services such as NHS Direct, as well as using 999 for emergencies. It is worth thinking ahead, spending a few minutes deciding how you can get the help you need and planning what to do. This guide tells you what NHS services are available, how to find them and what questions you could ask to get the most out of them. There are also suggestions on what you can do to encourage your future good health.

There are large numbers of voluntary organisations offering information and support for particular medical conditions. The ‘Useful organisations’ section ► **pages 17–19** gives contact details for organisations we mention here and NHS Direct can usually provide contact details if there is an organisation that may be helpful in your situation. ► **page 18**



# Getting help when you are feeling unwell

Discussing how you feel with a health professional can ensure you get appropriate treatment or give you peace of mind. Some of your options are set out on **pages 4–5**.

## Make the most of your local pharmacist

If you have a minor problem – sore throat, aches and pains – speak to your local pharmacist. They can advise on non-prescription medicines and help you decide if you need a doctor. Many pharmacists are also happy to answer questions over the phone or help if you have difficulty opening containers, reading labels or swallowing.

what  
next?

**Identify a local pharmacy where you can speak to the pharmacist without being overheard, if necessary. Make a note of their opening hours.**

## Visit an NHS walk-in centre

These centres, run by experienced nurses, treat minor illnesses and injuries. No appointment is needed and they open long hours seven days a week.

what  
next?

**Look in your practice leaflet or call NHS Direct ► **page 18** to see if there is a local walk-in centre and check its opening hours. Keep this information to hand.**

# Call NHS Direct

Nurses working on this confidential, national, 24-hour telephone advice service can advise on the most appropriate action based on your symptoms. If the advice is to treat yourself with non-prescription medicines, they have details of your nearest late opening pharmacy. You can be connected to the ambulance service if your condition appears serious.

If English is not your preferred language, ask to use their confidential translation service. There is a textphone service if you are deaf or hard of hearing.

what  
next?

**Place the NHS Direct number where you will find it easily when you need it. Information is also available on the website. ► page 18**

“My husband hadn’t been feeling well one Sunday but he didn’t think it was serious and didn’t want to bother our doctor. I was worried so I rang NHS Direct. When I told her about his symptoms, she told us we should go to an out-of-hours doctor at once, she sounded really concerned. She called up the doctor so they were expecting us and told us exactly where to go. When we arrived they said he’d had an allergic reaction and gave him an injection and he started to feel better almost right away. She really helped us get the best help at the right time.”

# Accident and Emergency departments and minor injuries units

The priority of Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments is to treat serious, life-threatening cases. It is often obvious when emergency treatment is needed – for example:

- loss of consciousness
- persistent chest pain (15 minutes or longer)
- symptoms that may indicate a stroke such as facial weakness, arm weakness or loss of speech
- difficulty breathing
- heavy loss of blood
- suspected broken bones.

In these circumstances you should phone 999 for an ambulance or take the patient to the nearest A&E department.

For less serious injuries, such as sprains, cuts and grazes, there are an increasing number of minor injuries units. Call NHS Direct for advice and to see if there is a unit nearby. ► **page 18**

# Your local GP practice

Your local GP (GP practice) offers a range of services to help you stay healthy as well as to diagnose and treat illness. They may offer healthy lifestyle screening, advice and help to give up smoking, and special support for patients with long-term conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure.

If you are joining a new practice, ask about services that may be important to you such as:

- wheelchair access or other access issues
- availability of male and female doctors and nurses
- staff who speak languages other than English
- support for your particular condition, such as a specialist nurse who offers regular monitoring of your health and treatment
- healthier lifestyle advice
- how to obtain repeat prescriptions
- how their appointment system works
- how far in advance you can book a non-urgent appointment
- how to contact a doctor out of hours – after 6.30pm on weekdays, over the weekend and Bank Holidays.

what  
next?

**If you are not registered with a GP, contact NHS Direct ► [page 18](#) for a list of local practices and call the practices to ask if your address is in their catchment area.**

# Deciding on treatment

Health professionals will want to help you understand your illness. Asking some of the following questions may help you decide which treatment is right for you.

- Are there different ways to treat my condition?
- What will happen if I don't have any treatment?
- What do you recommend?
- How effective is this treatment?
- Are there any side effects/risks?
- How long will I need treatment for?
- How will I know if it is working?
- Is there anything I should stop or avoid doing?
- Is there anything else I can do to help myself?

what  
next?

**If you are worried make an appointment to discuss your treatment with your GP. For further information look on the NHS Direct website. ► page 18**

‘My GP wanted to know how my arthritis affects my daily life and asked more than just how my medication was working.’

# Flu vaccinations

If you are aged 65 or over, you will be offered a flu jab each autumn to help avoid complications such as pneumonia or severe bronchitis. You will also be invited to have a ‘pneumo’ jab for further protection against pneumonia.

what  
next?

**Ask your practice for details of their vaccination programme.**

# Getting the most from your medicines

Medicines may be prescribed to cure or to help manage your illness. NHS prescriptions are free for people aged 60 or over. You might like to ask the following questions about the medicine.

- What does it do?
- Why is it important to take it?
- When and how do I take it?
- How long will I need to take it for?
- What should I be aware of when taking it?  
(Can I take it with non-prescription medicines such as aspirin or herbal remedies?)
- What should I do if I forget to take it?

Always read the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) that comes with the medicine. You can request large print/ Braille or CD versions of PILs from the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) Medicine Information Line on 0800 198 5000.

Your pharmacist can offer you a ‘medicine use review’; an opportunity to ask questions and discuss any problems you have.

If your medicine seems to have unwanted side effects, discuss this with your GP. If you take four or more medicines, a six-monthly review of your medicines is recommended.

what  
next?

**Contact Ask About Medicines for information to help you make informed decisions about your medicines. ► [page 17](#)**



case  
study

## Anne, 67, changed GP practice when she moved house last year...

- ¶ I registered with my current GP practice when I first moved into the area. I was offered a new patient health check with the practice nurse. She told me about some of the services I might be able to get, like a flu jab in winter. She also asked a lot of questions about how my health had been in the past.
- ¶ Generally I've been pretty healthy but I did mention that both of my parents had suffered from high blood pressure. The nurse took my blood pressure and it was a bit high so she asked me to come back the next week to have it checked again. As it was still raised when I went back she told me to make an appointment with the GP, who prescribed some medication.
- ¶ I joined a local walking group to help lose a bit of weight and between that and the medication my blood pressure has gone down to a level the nurse is happy with. I see the nurse for a check up every six months but so far we haven't had any further problems. ¶

# Continence problems

Loss of bladder or bowel control has many causes. There will often be effective treatment to help manage or cure the problem, particularly if it is diagnosed early.

what  
next?

**Speak to your GP or district nurse. If you prefer, you can contact your local continence service first. Contact The Continence Foundation helpline for details of your local continence service. For further information contact The Continence Foundation or NHS Direct. ► pages 17–18**

# Chiropody

You must meet local eligibility criteria to be treated by a chiropodist as an NHS patient. You are unlikely to meet them unless you have a medical foot problem or a condition, such as diabetes, that puts you at risk of foot problems.

what  
next?

**Speak to your practice nurse or contact the local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) for information. Call the Age Concern Information Line for the number of your local Age Concern. It may offer or know about local nail cutting services. ► pages 17–18**

**‘I don’t qualify for NHS chiropody where I live. Luckily Age Concern runs a service. I have to pay but it’s still a real godsend.’**

# Help to stop smoking

Your practice may offer support for giving up smoking on a one-to-one or group basis. Nicotine replacement therapy may also be available on prescription.

what  
next?

**Ask at your practice for details or call the NHS smoking helpline. ► page 18**

# Screening for breast cancer and other cancers

Between the ages of 50 and 70, women are invited every three years to take part in the NHS breast-screening programme. They are not invited once they reach 70 but have the right to be screened every three years on request.

Between the ages of 50 and 64, women registered with a GP are invited every five years for cervical cancer screening through the NHS call and recall system.

A national bowel cancer-screening programme is being phased in over three years, starting in 2006. Men and women between the ages of 60 and 69 will be invited to take part every two years.

what  
next?

**NHS Direct ► page 18 has details of local breast cancer screening centres. If it is more than five years since your last cervical screening, ask NHS Direct whom you can contact. See [www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk](http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk) for further information.**

# Hearing difficulties

Your GP will check whether there is a medical reason for a hearing problem and if necessary refer you for a hearing test. A hearing aid in one or both ears may be recommended. NHS hearing aids are available on loan. Batteries are free.

what  
next?

**Speak to your GP if you are having problems. Contact RNID for information and advice. If you have both sight and hearing loss contact Sense. ► page 19**

# Optical services

You are entitled to an NHS-funded sight test if you are aged 60 or over. You are recommended to have a sight test every two years between the ages of 18 and 69; every 12 months if you are aged 70 and over. Confirm that it includes checks for conditions that are more common in older people.

If you need glasses you do not have to buy them from the optician who tests your eyes. You can take your prescription to another optician who offers a wider selection or cheaper range of glasses. People on a low income may be entitled to help with the cost. ► page 15

what  
next?

**Contact the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) for information and advice. If you have both sight and hearing loss contact Sense. ► pages 18–19**

# Dentistry

To ensure your teeth and gums stay healthy, it is important to brush your teeth effectively and see a dentist regularly. If you have false teeth, regular check ups with a dentist are just as important. Dentures are likely to need replacing every five years as the shape of your mouth changes. If, for health reasons, you have difficulty getting to a dentist, your dentist may be able to visit you or you may be eligible for treatment through the Community Dental Service.

Dental access centres have been introduced in many areas where it is difficult to find a dentist offering NHS treatment. Patients needing emergency treatment take priority, so you may have to wait for a routine appointment.

what  
next?

**To access emergency treatment, find a local dentist offering NHS treatment. To find a dental access centre, call NHS Direct or look on the website. For more information about the Community Dental Service, ask NHS Direct for details of your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). ► page 18**

## NHS dental charges

The charging system is based on three bands of treatment and reviewed annually. People on a low income may be entitled to help with the cost of NHS dental treatment. ► page 15

what  
next?

**Ask your dental practice for a copy of *What you need to know about changes to NHS dentistry in England.***

# Help with health costs

If you receive Pension Credit Guarantee Credit (gPC) you are entitled to free NHS dental treatment, vouchers towards glasses or contact lenses and a refund of reasonable costs of travelling to receive NHS treatment while under the care of a hospital consultant.

If you do not receive gPC and have savings below a certain limit, you may be entitled to help with meeting these costs under the NHS low-income scheme (LIS).

what  
next?

**If you receive gPC take your 'award notice' with you next time you visit a dentist for NHS treatment, need glasses or contact lenses or are travelling to hospital for NHS treatment.**

**Pick up a claim form (HC1) at your dentist, optician or GP practice if you think you may be eligible for help through the LIS. There is a special form HC1 (SC) for care-home residents whose care is part-funded by the local authority. More information about the low-income scheme is available as a leaflet, cassette or audio CD by calling the Help with Health Costs helpline. ► [page 17](#)**

**“I used to put off getting my eyes checked because I was worried about the cost. When I had a benefits check they told me I could get help with this as well as things like rent and council tax. Wish I'd asked sooner.”**

# Getting involved in your local area

Many practices have a patient group that meets regularly to discuss how well the practice meets patient needs and what improvements they would like. If major changes are proposed to local services, there must be a formal consultation and a review of these changes by a local council committee.

what next?

**Ask your practice manager how they seek patients' views about services and whether they have a patient involvement group. Your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) will know how you can become involved. ► page 18**

## Compliments and complaints

Practice staff are keen to hear when patients are pleased with their care. However, there may be occasions when you are unhappy with services or the attitude of staff.

what next?

**Try to resolve the issue informally by first raising it with the staff concerned or with their manager. If this is not successful, the practice will have a person with responsibility for managing complaints. If you remain dissatisfied you should be told how to take your complaint further. If you feel unable to speak directly to the staff concerned, the local PALS ► page 18 may be able to help you resolve the issue informally. They can also give information about the NHS complaints procedure. If you would like support when making a formal complaint, contact the local Independent Complaints Advisory Service.**

# Useful organisations

## **Age Concern**

For details of your nearest local Age Concern, call the Age Concern Information Line on (free call) 0800 00 99 66 or visit our website at [www.ageconcern.org.uk](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk)

## **Ask About Medicines**

An independent organisation that aims to help patients make informed decisions about their medicines. Further information is available on its website [www.askaboutmedicines.org](http://www.askaboutmedicines.org)

## **Continence Foundation (The)**

Information about continence issues.

307 Hatton Square  
16 Baldwins Gardens  
London EC1N 7RJ

Tel: 0845 345 0165 (lo-call rate)

Website: [www.continence-foundation.org.uk](http://www.continence-foundation.org.uk)

## **Help with Health Costs helpline**

Contact to request a claim form or further information about the low-income scheme in different formats.

Tel: 0845 850 11 66 (lo-call rate)

## **NHS Direct**

Telephone service staffed by experienced nurses offering advice and information about health, illnesses, and health services.

Tel: 0845 4647 (lo-call rate)

Website: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

## **NHS smoking helpline**

For information on stopping smoking and details of support.

Tel: 0800 169 0 169 (free call)

Textphone: 0845 606 4647 (lo-call rate)

Website: [www.gosmokefree.co.uk](http://www.gosmokefree.co.uk)

## **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

Provides information, advice and support to users of health services.

To find your nearest PALS contact NHS Direct:

Tel: 0845 4647 (lo-call rate)

Website: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

## **Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB)**

National organisation offering information and support for blindness and visual impairment.

105 Judd Street

London WC1H 9NE

Tel: 0845 766 9999 (lo-call rate)

Website: [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

## **RNID**

National charity offering information and support for deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

19–23 Featherstone Street

London EC1Y 8SL

Tel: 0808 808 0123 (free call)

Textphone: 0808 808 9000 (free call)

Website: [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

## **Sense**

National organisation offering information and support to those with dual sensory impairment (deafblindness).

11–13 Clifton Terrace

London N4 3SR

Tel: 020 7272 7774

Website: [www.sense.org.uk](http://www.sense.org.uk)

# What should I do now?

If you would like more information on the issues in this guide or are interested in ordering any of the other Age Concern Information Guides listed below, please get in touch.

**Call the Age Concern Information Line free on 0800 00 99 66.**

**Visit [www.ageconcern.org.uk/information](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/information):**

- find out about our full range of Information Guides
- ask for this guide in a more accessible format
- find your local Age Concern.

**The following Age Concern Information Guides are also available and may be helpful:**

- *Help with care in your own home*
- *How to find a care home*
- *Choices in retirement housing*
- *Planning your retirement income*
- *Help with legal advice.*

Take a look at our full range of free Information Guides covering issues of your health and home, your money and managing your life at [www.ageconcern.org.uk/information](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/information)

Age Concern also publishes books covering many of the above issues. Browse our online bookshop at [www.ageconcern.org.uk/bookshop](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/bookshop)