

Living Rights Project

GUIDES



Healthcare in the UK

The NHS, the National Health Service, provides public health care in the UK.

All the services that the NHS provides are **free**. However, you will likely have to pay for dentist and optician services. There is a charge for prescriptions in England but not in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

People from **European Economic Area (EEA)** countries can use NHS services.

England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland run their local NHS services separately.

If you need to see a doctor

In an emergency

If you need **emergency medical help** call 999.

If you need **medical help fast but it's not an emergency** call 111.

After an accident

Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments deal with life-threatening emergencies, such as loss of consciousness, severe chest pain or severe bleeding.

They are usually part of major hospitals.

For non-urgent health care

General Practitioners (GPs) provide healthcare for local communities.

GPs are your first point of contact if you are ill. They usually work in a 'surgery' (the name has nothing to do with surgical procedures). You need to register with one near you and book an appointment each time you want to see a doctor.

To get a **specialist appointment or a hospital appointment** (e.g. to see a dermatologist, sexual health services, etc.), you will usually need to see your GP first, who will refer you to a specialist doctor.

If you have an illness or injury which is not an emergency but you can't wait for the appointment, you can go to a **walk-in clinic** where a nurse will see you. Be prepared to wait for several hours.



Primary care vs. Secondary care

You might hear people talking about primary or secondary care. They are:

- **Primary care** is the first point of contact for most people and is delivered by various professionals, including GPs, dentists, pharmacists and optometrists, including NHS walk-in centres and the NHS 111 telephone service.
- **Secondary care** is the health care services provided by medical specialists, dental specialists and other health professionals who generally do not have first contact with patients: for example, cardiologists, skilled attendance during childbirth, intensive care.

Finding health services

You can find hospitals, clinics, dentists and other health services that are local to you by using these websites:

- **England:** www.nhs.uk/Service-Search
- **Scotland:** <http://www.nhs24.com/findlocal/>
- **Wales:** <http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/localservices/searchlocalservices.aspx>
- **Northern Ireland:** <http://servicefinder.hscni.net/>

Accessing healthcare

GPs can decide whether or not to register patients, so long as they do not discriminate against anyone. There is no law preventing GPs from treating anyone. A patient does not need to be 'ordinarily resident' in the country to be eligible for NHS primary medical care - this only applies to secondary (hospital) care. Some GP practices may ask for proof of identity and address when you register.

If you need hospital treatment or to see a specialist (secondary medical care) you may be asked to prove that you are 'ordinarily resident'.

This means living in the UK on a lawful, voluntary and properly settled basis. To prove that, you can show, for example, utility bills, tenancy agreements or pay slips.

Overseas visitors

If you are not ordinarily resident in the UK, you are considered to be an **overseas visitor** and may have to pay for NHS hospital services.

If you are visiting from a European Economic Area (EEA) country you should get the free **European Health Insurance Card (EHIC)** from your home country before arriving in the UK. This gives you the right to access NHS healthcare on your temporary stay at a reduced cost or for free. It covers immediate and clinically necessary treatment during your visit but not treatment that could wait until your return home.

If you do not have a valid EHIC you can apply for a **Provisional Replacement Certificate (PRC)** from your home country's healthcare system.

If you have to pay for hospital treatment you should contact your home healthcare system when you return home and they might refund some of your costs.



Treatment is free for all patients regardless of residency if your healthcare need is caused by torture, female genital mutilation, domestic violence or sexual violence (except where the overseas visitor has travelled to the UK for the purpose of seeking that treatment).

EEA students

If you are from the European Economic Area (EEA) or Switzerland and you need care, you may be asked to show:

- your European Health Insurance Card (EHIC)
- a letter from your university or college which confirms that you have a place on a full-time course. The letter should say when your course starts and how long it lasts for.

Healthcare when moving in the EU

An **EHIC** (European Health Insurance Card) gives you the right to access healthcare on temporary stays in other European Economic Area (EEA) countries and Switzerland at a reduced cost, or sometimes for free. It will cover **immediate and clinically necessary state-funded treatment** until your planned return home to the UK.

An EHIC is **free of charge**. Apply here: <https://www.ehic.org.uk/Internet/startApplication.do>

Seeing your local doctor

Your first point of contact to access healthcare in the UK is a doctor called a GP or a general practitioner.

Your GP has your medical records and is the best person to understand your health history and treatments.

GPs are well trained and qualified, and will be able to help in many cases. Do not just ask them to refer you to a specialist doctor, see what they can help with first.

How to register with a GP

You can choose which GP practice you want to register with.

Contact the surgery and ask if they will take you on. If they agree, they will ask you to fill in a registration form. Some GP practices also want to see proof of your identity, like a passport, and proof of your address, like a utility bill.

Children under 16 should be registered by their parent(s), but they don't have to register with the same GP as the rest of their family.

If you're staying somewhere in the UK for less than three months, you can ask to be registered with a GP on a temporary basis. You can also register temporarily if you move around the country and have no permanent address.

If you are homeless, you are still entitled to register with a GP using a temporary address which may be a friend's address or a day centre.

Problems with registering

Unless the GP's register is full, or you live too far away for home visits, it is unlikely that the GP will refuse to accept you.



If you have been unable to register with a GP, you should contact the local **Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)** or **NHS England**. Send them your medical card, with a letter giving the name of any GPs who have refused to register you, and any GPs you would prefer not to be registered with.

Home visits

You cannot insist that a GP visits you at home. A GP will only visit you at home if they think that your medical condition requires it. A GP can also decide how urgently a visit is needed.

Changing a GP

You can change your GP at any time you wish without having to give a reason. When you have found another GP willing to accept you, you should contact them and ask if they will take you on. You can then make an appointment to see the new GP immediately.

Alternative therapies

Some GPs are qualified in alternative therapies and may offer these as part of their NHS treatment. In some areas GPs may be able to refer a client to alternative practitioners, but this will not always be available.

Getting hospital treatment

Unless it is an emergency, you will need to be referred by your GP to get hospital treatment.

Emergency treatment

NHS treatment at an Accident & Emergency (A&E) or casualty department is free to everyone, regardless of their residency status. However, this does not include emergency treatment given in any other department in the hospital.

Following the A&E treatment, it is for NHS healthcare providers to decide whether an overseas visitor still needs to stay in the hospital for treatment or is allowed to go home, and whether or not they should pay for that treatment.

Seeing a dentist

You can find dentists in your area using the NHS Service Search websites (see **Finding health services** above).

NHS dental charges vary in each UK country. Private dental practices will charge a lot more. Not all dental practices will have the capacity to take on new NHS patients so it is best to join a waiting list or contact several practices.

Pharmacies

Pharmacists and chemists are experts in medicine. Your local pharmacist will be able to get you the medicines prescribed by your doctor. There is a charge for prescriptions in England but not in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.



Pharmacists can also offer details and advice about medicines which can be bought without a prescription.

Sexual health

Most types of contraception (condoms, pills etc.) are free to all women and men in the UK (regardless of residency status) through the NHS. You can get them from GPs, community contraception clinics and sexual health clinics.

You can find sexual health clinics in your area using the NHS Service Search websites (see **Finding health services** above).

Sexual health advice is free (through the NHS) and confidential, including for people under the age of 16. You can also get free diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections.

Abortion

Abortion is legal in the UK usually up to 24 weeks and is available free through the NHS (also for European Economic Area (EEA) citizens **who are resident in the UK**). You will need a referral from your doctor, or from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service: www.bpas.org ☐ 03457 30 40 30

Abortion is also available through private clinics where you will have to pay £450 - £750.

Help with meeting healthcare costs

The NHS in England typically doesn't cover the cost of prescriptions, dental treatment or sight tests etc.

However, children (under 16), older people (60+), people on some benefits, pregnant women, people in care and hospital inpatients may get these services for free.

You can also get full or partial help towards paying for NHS services and equipment which are not typically free if you are on a low income. You will need to apply for the NHS's **Low Income Scheme**.

If you are not entitled to free prescriptions you may find it cheaper to buy a **Prescription Prepayment Certificate (PPC)**. This will cover all the NHS prescriptions you need during the period of the certificate.

You can check if you qualify for help with costs:

• <http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcosts/Pages/help-with-health-costs.aspx>

Main healthcare rights in the UK

- **Access** – you have a right to access NHS services appropriate to your needs.
- **Communication and participation** - you have a right to get information about your healthcare and services available to you, and for health staff to explain things clearly to you. You have a right to be involved in decisions about your healthcare.
- **Confidentiality** - you have a right for all your personal health information to be kept confidential, and to know how it is used.
- **Respect** - you have a right to be treated with dignity and respect.



- **Safety** - you have a right to be treated and cared for by properly qualified staff in a safe and clean setting.
- **Feedback and complaints** – you have a right to have a say about your healthcare, and to have your complaints dealt with properly.



Making a complaint

If you're not happy with the treatment you've received or you've been refused treatment, you have the right to:

- have your complaint dealt with efficiently, and be properly investigated
- know the outcome of any investigation into your complaint
- take your complaint to the independent ombudsman if you're not satisfied with the way the NHS has dealt with your complaint
- receive compensation if you've been harmed.

Informal complaints

Try having an informal chat with your doctor or a member of staff first. A formal complaint takes time and minor issues are resolved more quickly if you just speak to a person on site.

Formal complaint to the NHS

Every NHS service has a complaints procedure. If you want to make a formal complaint about any aspect of NHS treatment, ask for a copy of the complaints procedure for the service concerned. To find out about it, ask a member of staff, look on the hospital or trust's website, or contact the complaints department for more information.

Formal complaints to the Clinical Commissioning Groups (England only)

NHS services are commissioned, planned and paid for by either NHS England or Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs). If you feel too uncomfortable to complain to the service provider directly then you can make a complaint to the commissioner of the services instead.

- <http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Clinical-Commissioning-Group/LocationSearch/1>

Formal complaints to the ombudsman:

If you are unhappy with the outcome of your complaint you can refer the matter to the 'ombudsman', which is independent of the NHS and government:

- **England:** the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman:
 - <http://www.ombudsman.org.uk/make-a-complaint>
 - ☐ 0345 015 403
- **Scotland:** the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO):
 - www.spsso.org.uk
 - ☐ 0800 377 7330

You should complain as soon as possible. Complaints should normally be made within **12 months of the date of the event** that you're complaining about, or as soon as the matter first came to your attention.

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