

Information Sheet

30 Your Health Services: Where to Start

This information sheet aims to explain the different primary health care services available to you. It gives you basic information on how to access these services. It also tells you which organisations to contact for advice and information on health issues and how to find out about local services in your area.

Contents

What is primary care?	page 2
Your family doctor	page 2
You and your dentist	page 8
Other primary care services	page 16
Information and advice	page 18
Complaining about the NHS	page 20
Useful contacts	page 20

What is primary care?

Primary care services are provided by the National Health Service (NHS) to meet basic health care needs. They are aimed at keeping people healthy and at treating routine injuries and illnesses. Primary care is also referred to as ‘family health services’. It is provided in the community, by people you normally see when you first have a health problem. This includes family doctors, community nurses, opticians, dentists, pharmacists and therapists. You can find out where your nearest primary care service is by visiting NHS Direct at www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Your family doctor

Your family doctor (GP) is usually your first contact with the National Health Service. Talking to your doctor is a good starting point if you, or the person you care for, has any health-related problems. Your family doctor can give you general medical advice and treatment and can prescribe medication. Doctors can also refer you to other community-based professionals, such as those listed on pages 16–18, or to a specialist in a hospital.

Registering with a family doctor

Everyone should be registered with a family doctor. If you do not already have a family doctor you should join a GP surgery, even if you currently have no health problems. This is important, because it means you will have a doctor close by who has access to your medical records and is aware of your medical history, and who can provide emergency home visits. **Do not wait until you are ill to register with a family doctor.**

Each GP surgery (doctor’s practice) has a boundary area. You will be able to register with a GP surgery only if you live within its boundary area. If you move to another area outside this boundary you will have to notify your doctor and register with a new practice in your new area. If you remain with your original doctor, and don’t tell them you have moved, you may find that they won’t make home visits because you live too far away.

GP surgeries have a maximum number of patients that they can look after. It could happen that a doctor within your area will not accept you on to their patient list because it is already full. If this happens, try a different practice in your area. If you can’t find a practice that will take you, it is the responsibility of

your primary care trust (in England), health board (in Wales and Scotland) or health and social services board (in Northern Ireland) to find one for you.

When you have found a doctor's practice in your area, you will need to go into the surgery to register. Take your NHS medical card with you if you have one. You may be asked to fill in a registration form (GMS1) when you go in to register. You will need to know the name of your previous doctor so that your new practice can get your medical records.

After you have registered with your new doctor, you will be asked to go into the surgery to have a 'new patient check'. This is a routine health check-up, usually carried out by the practice nurse. It will give your new doctor information about your immediate health needs and medication.

When you register, your doctor's practice should give you information that tells you:

- the name(s) of the doctor(s) in your practice
- the surgery opening hours
- how the appointment system works
- how to request and collect repeat prescriptions
- what to do if you need treatment outside surgery hours or at home.

Visiting your doctor

Call your surgery and make an appointment to see your doctor. Check with your practice how to do this. For example, you may have to telephone your practice at a particular time if you want an appointment that day. It is very important that you keep your appointment and try to arrive on time. If you can't keep your appointment you should let your doctor know as early as possible. This will mean that someone else can have your appointment.

Government guidelines say that your doctor should try to see you within 48 hours of your asking for an appointment. However, in some cases you may have to wait longer. If you are not feeling well and need to see a doctor immediately, most GP surgeries offer emergency appointments or hold 'open surgeries'. Open surgeries operate on a 'first come, first served' basis, so you may have to wait for some time before a doctor can see you.

In many practices you will be able to speak to a doctor or nurse on the telephone, but you will need to phone the practice at an agreed time or be

available for your doctor to call you back. Some problems can be dealt with over the phone, which will save you travelling to the surgery, as well as a long wait in the waiting room. Check with your practice whether it has emergency appointments, open surgeries or a triage system and ask staff how they work.

Your **local pharmacist** can advise on minor illnesses. These include:

- aches and pains
- allergies
- common drugs
- eye infections
- stomach problems
- skin conditions
- women's health issues, including treatment for thrush.

Your pharmacy may run clinics for certain conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure or high cholesterol.

Your pharmacist can also help you to decide whether you need to see a doctor. You can talk to your pharmacist in confidence and don't need to make an appointment.

Your appointment with your doctor

It is important to try to get the most out of your doctor's appointment. You will probably have only five to ten minutes with your doctor, so it is a good idea to prepare. Think about what you want to discuss with your doctor. It can be useful to take some notes along to help you remember everything you want to tell your doctor or ask about.

- Think about the main reason you are visiting your doctor. You may have a new health problem: for example, you may have had a fall. You may be making a follow-up visit for a longer-term problem: for example, you may have recently had a stroke or be unhappy with your current medication. Or you could be visiting your doctor for a general health check-up.
- Try to concentrate on one health issue at a time. If you need to see your doctor about more than one problem ask for a double appointment, although not every GP surgery will provide this. If you have communication difficulties, you should be able to book a longer appointment. If you are deaf or hard of hearing, arrangements can be made for a sign language interpreter to be present.

- Try to be clear about any symptoms you have: for example, where there is pain, what kind of pain it is, and how you are feeling.
- You may have had health problems over a period of time before visiting your doctor. Try to write down when the problems occurred and any factors you think may have played a role. Is this problem getting worse? Or does it come and go?
- Think about the questions you would like to ask your doctor.

During your appointment it is important that you feel comfortable and can give your doctor the information they need. It is also important to make sure you get the information and advice you need, and that you understand what your doctor tells you.

- Try to be open and honest with your doctor. Remember that everything you say is confidential. Don't just put on a 'brave face' when your doctor asks you questions. Thinking positively is not a bad thing, but your doctor needs to know the full extent of your health problem. If you don't tell your doctor how you are feeling, they will not be able to guess.
- Ask questions. If you don't understand something your doctor has said, ask them to explain it to you. If necessary, ask your doctor to write down the answers and explanations.
- You may find it useful to take some notes when the doctor is talking to you. It is easy to forget what your doctor said after you leave the surgery.
- You may find it helpful to take someone with you. Having a friend or relative present can make some people feel more comfortable. It can also help to have someone else there to ask questions if you are uncomfortable doing so yourself.

I won't visit the doctor because . . .

It is important to see your family doctor if you have any health-related problems. The quicker a problem is spotted and diagnosed, the better the chances that it can be dealt with. It also increases the likelihood of you having a better quality of life. But there are various reasons why people put off visiting their doctor, even if they are feeling very ill.

- *'I don't want to bother the doctor.'* Many people feel that they are causing a fuss and don't want to waste their doctor's time. If you are feeling ill it is important to seek medical advice. Remember that your doctor is there to help keep you in good health as well as to cure you. It is better for a health problem to be discovered early by your family doctor, than to end

up being rushed to hospital. If you really don't think that it is necessary to see a doctor, you could ask to see the practice nurse. Or you can first try to get advice over the telephone from a nurse or doctor at your practice (see pages 3–4), or by calling an information service (see the section 'Information and advice' on page 18). It is important not to ignore your health problem – you should at least speak to someone who can make a professional assessment of whether you need to see a doctor.

- *'I'm scared that if I go to see my doctor I may find out something is wrong with me.'* It is quite common for people to put off going to see their doctor because they are afraid of what they might be told. You should always tell your doctor if you think you have a health problem. Remember that the earlier you tell your doctor that you are worried about your health, the better the chances that any problem can be resolved. The longer you leave it, the more serious and complicated it can get. It could even be that the problem is less serious than you fear, and you will have saved yourself a lot of unnecessary worry.
- *'I don't like my doctor.'* Sometimes people find that they don't get on well with their doctor. This can make them uncomfortable about making an appointment when they need to. There are several things you can do if you feel like this. If your practice has more than one doctor (most practices do) you could ask to see a different doctor. For many health problems you can also ask to see the practice nurse, rather than your doctor. Another option is for you to change to a different doctors' practice. There is nothing to stop you changing your doctor, providing you can find another practice in your area that can take you on to its patient list. If you are unhappy with the way you have been treated by your doctor you can make a complaint. See our information sheet no. 27, *How to Make a Complaint*.

What if I'm ill but my GP surgery is closed?

Sometimes you may be very ill and need to see a doctor outside normal surgery opening hours. For example, you may fall ill over the weekend when your doctor's practice is closed. If this happens, you (or a friend or relative) should call your GP surgery. You will either get through to a duty doctor or there will be a recorded message telling you how you can contact the doctor on duty. Most doctors have formed co-operatives with other practices to provide out-of-hours care, so the doctor you see will not necessarily be from your own practice.

If you are in England or Wales you can also contact **NHS Direct** on **0845 4647** for advice from a nurse 24 hours a day. NHS Direct can also give you the number of an out-of-hours service. If you are living in Scotland call **NHS 24** on **08454 24 24 24**. There is no similar line in Northern Ireland, but your local health and social services board can give details of primary care services in your area, including your GP out-of-hours service. For more details, see page 21.

What if I'm too ill to get to my doctor?

You or your partner may be too unwell or infirm to visit your doctor: for example, if you are terminally ill or unable to leave your bed. If you are unable to visit your GP surgery for medical reasons, you can ask your doctor to make a **home visit**. Call your GP surgery. Your doctor may be able to give you advice over the phone and will visit you if they think it is necessary. If possible, try to call your doctor in the morning if you think you need a visit the same day.

What if I'm not registered with a doctor or am away from home?

You should always be able to see a doctor if you need urgent attention. If you are away from home or have not registered with a family doctor and you fall ill, you should contact the nearest surgery and ask them to see you. You can receive emergency treatment for **14 days**. After that you will need to register as a **temporary resident**. You can be a temporary resident for **up to three months**. You will still be able to remain registered as a patient with the doctor where you normally live.

If you do have to go to see the doctor as an emergency, it will help if you can provide some information about your medical history. Remember to tell the doctor about:

- ongoing medical problems
- medical problems you have had
- the name of any medicines you are taking
- whether you are allergic to anything
- the contact details of your previous or permanent doctor.

If you are going to be living somewhere for more than three months you should register with a local doctor as a permanent resident.

What if I want to change my doctor?

You have the right to change your doctor without giving a reason. If you want

to change your doctor, you need to follow the same procedures for registering with a family doctor – see page 2.

What if I move into a care home?

Everyone has the right to be treated by a family doctor, whether or not they are living in a care home. If you move into a care home in your area you may be able to keep the same doctor if this is what you want. You will need to ask your doctor if this is possible. If your doctor is not able to carry on treating you, ask your care home for advice on which GP surgery you should join. Care homes often have a number of local doctors that treat residents. If you move into a care home in a different area you will have to register with a new doctor. Your care home should be able to tell you which local doctors treat the other residents.

Prescriptions

Everyone aged 60 and over automatically qualifies for free prescriptions, and in Wales, everyone qualifies for free prescriptions regardless of age. Simply tick the relevant box on the back of the prescription and complete and sign the declaration in the space provided before handing it over the counter at the pharmacy. Usually the prescription will have your date of birth printed on it, but if it doesn't you will have to show proof that you are over 60. You can do this by showing an official document with your name and date of birth on, such as your NHS medical card, driving licence or passport.

Some pharmacies will deliver your prescription to you at home if you are unable to leave the house. Ask your pharmacist if this can be done and whether or not there will be a charge. In some areas of the country Age Concern has local branches where you may be able to find a volunteer who would be able to pick up the prescription for you. To find your local branch of Age Concern, contact its head office. See the Useful contacts section, starting on page 20.

You and your dentist

A number of changes to NHS dentistry were introduced from 1 April 2006. The following section outlines the changes which took place.

Do I have to register with a dentist to get treatment?

You do not have to register with a dentist to get an appointment. You need only to contact a local dentist to find out whether they offer NHS or private

treatment and whether they have a space available to see you. Although dentists are no longer required to register patients, this does not stop them from keeping lists of regular patients or providing ongoing treatment and care.

Will I still be able to get an appointment with the same dentist?

You can ask to continue having check-ups and treatment with your regular dentist but this may not always be possible, depending on how busy the practice is.

How often should I go to the dentist?

How often you go to the dentist will depend on when the dentist thinks you need a follow-up appointment. It could mean that you go less regularly than you are used to. The time to your next check-up could be as short as three months or as long as two years. People with healthy teeth and gums will need to go less regularly. If you have higher treatment needs, you may need to attend more frequently than you did before. Your dentist will give you a date for your next appointment and discuss this with you. **It is important to keep your appointment with your dentist.** If you miss an appointment without telling your dentist in good time, your dentist cannot charge you but they may decide not to offer you treatment in the future.

What kind of treatment is available on the NHS?

All necessary treatment to keep your mouth, teeth and gums healthy is available on the NHS. Dentures are also available on the NHS. If you want to have cosmetic treatments, such as tooth whitening or large white fillings, you will need to pay for this yourself.

How do I find an NHS dentist?

To find an NHS dentist, you will need to contact your local primary care trust and ask what dentists are available in your area. You can also look in the phone book. Alternatively:

- If you are living in England or Wales, call NHS Direct on 0845 4647 which can give you a list of local NHS dentists. It can tell you if the practices are taking on new patients, or offer occasional and emergency dental treatment on the NHS.
- In Northern Ireland, contact your local health and social services board and ask for the 'dental department' – see page 21 for contact details.
- In Scotland call NHS 24 on 08454 242424 for a list of local dentists.

Unfortunately, in some areas of the UK it is becoming more and more difficult to find an NHS dentist. You may have to try a few dental practices before you find one willing to accept you as an NHS patient and there may be a waiting list. Your local primary care trust (in England and Wales), health board (in Scotland) or health and social services board (in Northern Ireland) has a duty to provide NHS dental services in your area. If you have difficulty finding a dentist, it will be able to give you details of NHS dentists. Its details should be listed in your local phone book or available from the organisation that deals with your country in the above list.

A dentist cannot be made to take on NHS patients and can change from NHS to private if they want to. **Make sure that before you have any dental treatment, you confirm with your dentist that you are definitely an NHS patient.**

What should I expect from my dentist?

You should be able to expect the following when you go for a dental check-up. Your dentist should:

- Give you a thorough examination of your mouth, teeth and gums.
- Explain your treatment options and let you know what can be provided on the NHS or privately.
- Make sure you know how much your NHS and/or private treatment will cost.
- Provide you with a written treatment plan (including costs) if you are receiving a mix of NHS and private care.
- Display a poster about NHS charges in the waiting room.
- Discuss with you how often you need to attend – if you have good oral health it is unlikely you will need a check up every six months.
- Provide a leaflet with information about the practice and the services available.

What if I'm not registered with a dentist?

Anyone who is not currently registered with an NHS dentist will be able to get advice and NHS treatment at a Dental Access Centre, or information on other local NHS dental services. You may have a Dental Access Centre in your area, especially if there is a lack of NHS dentists. But, you may find that your local Dental Access Centre will prioritise patients needing more urgent treatment.

To find out whether there is a Dental Access Centre in your area, you can contact your local primary care trust.

What if I need emergency treatment?

If you need emergency treatment and have a regular dentist, you can ask whether NHS out-of-hours treatment is available. Dentists' surgeries generally try to treat patients within 24 hours of being notified. If you do not have a regular dentist, you will need to contact your local primary care trust which is responsible for emergency and out-of-hours care in its area. You can find its details in your phone book or you can call NHS Direct on 0845 4647 if you live in England or Wales. If you live in Scotland, call NHS 24 on 08454 242424; and if you live in Northern Ireland, contact your local health and social services board (see page 21). You can also find out about out-of-hours dental services from your nearest NHS Walk-in Centre. It can offer fast and convenient access to a range of NHS services.

What if I can't get to a dentist without difficulty?

If you have problems getting about, check that you will be able to get into the dentist's premises and into the surgery – sometimes stairs can be a problem. If you are unable to leave the house, you might be able to get a home visit from a dentist at no extra cost. Most treatments can be carried out in your own home.

Home visits may be made by your own dentist, or could be carried out by the local Community Dental Service. Ask your dentist for advice, or, for details of your local Community Dental Service contact your local primary care trust.

Paying for dental care

Dental treatment is **not** free for everyone, so ask about cost before treatment. From 1 April 2006, if you are not entitled to free treatment or some help towards health charges, you will have to pay one of three treatment charges in England and Wales; this applies even if you need to visit more than once to complete the treatment. The amount you will be charged will depend on the treatment you need.

The treatment charges are listed in the table below.

Treatment	England	Wales
Examination, diagnosis and preventative advice	£16.50	£12.00
Examination, diagnosis and preventative advice and one or more fillings	£45.60	£39.00
Examination, diagnosis and preventative advice with one or more fillings and one or more crowns	£198.00	£177.00
Urgent and out-of-hours treatment	£16.20	£12.00

Scotland and Northern Ireland are still operating under an old system at the moment, which involves paying a fee per item, but have plans to change; this won't be in the near future. If you live in Scotland or Northern Ireland, and want more information on dental charges in your area, contact the **British Dental Health Foundation** on **0845 063 1188**.

Check whether you are getting NHS or private treatment – NHS treatment will be cheaper than private dental treatment. To get an idea of current NHS dental charges in England, see the NHS leaflet HC12, *A quick guide to help with health costs including charges and optical voucher values*. You can pick up a copy from your dentist or local benefits office. Or, if you are in England, Scotland or Wales, call the Prescription Pricing Authority (PPA) Patient Services on **0845 850 1166**.

In Wales you are automatically entitled to free dental examinations if you are over 60. In Scotland, basic and extensive clinical examinations are free for everyone. Everyone gets free treatment to stop bleeding and for repairs to dentures.

For information on NHS dental charges in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, call the British Dental Health Foundation on 0845 063 1188. It offers free, impartial dental advice and can provide you with general advice on oral health and procedures at the dentist.

Help with health costs

NHS dental treatment is free if, when the treatment starts or when the charge is made, you (or your husband, wife or civil partner) are getting:

- the guarantee credit part of Pension Credit;
- Income Support;

- income-based Job Seeker's Allowance; or
- receive Working Tax Credit (WTC) with a disability or severe disability element.

You can also get free dental treatment if you are receiving a War Disablement Pension and need the treatment because of a war disability. If you are getting Working Tax Credit or Child Tax Credit, you may be entitled to help with charges for NHS dental treatment. To find out more, ask at your local benefits office, or call the PPA's Patient Services on **0845 850 1166** (if you are in England, Scotland or Wales).

Dental treatment is also free if you are an NHS in-patient and the treatment is carried out by the hospital dentist. However, if you still need dental treatment once you have been discharged from hospital, you would need to pay for this yourself unless you are exempt for any other reason listed on pages 12–13.

If you are a patient of the Community Dental Service dental treatment will **not** be free, unless you are entitled to free treatment because you fall into one of the categories listed above.

If you don't get the guarantee credit part of Pension Credit, but are on a low income you may still be able to get help with dental charges. If you have savings of less than £16,000 you may get help through the **NHS low income scheme**:

- NHS dental treatment is free if you have a current NHS certificate **HC2** which entitles you to full help with your health charges.
- You may also be able to get some help towards your dental charges if you have NHS certificate **HC3**, which will state the maximum you have to pay.

To apply for one of these certificates fill in and return form **HC1**, which you can get from your dentist's receptionist or your local benefits office.

Tell your dentist or the receptionist that you qualify for free treatment **before** you have anything done. You will need to tick a box on a form the dentist gives you stating that you are entitled to free treatment.

For more information on getting help to pay for dental treatment, see the NHS leaflet **HC11**, *Help with health costs*. Pick up a copy at your dentist or local benefits office. Or, if you are in England, Scotland or Wales, call the PPA

Patient Services on **0845 850 1166**. Also see our information sheet no. 9, *Health Benefits*.

Before you have any treatment make sure you are fully informed.

Make sure you know:

- the treatment your dentist plans to give you (this may be a course of treatment involving several procedures);
- whether or not you are being treated as an NHS patient (some unessential treatment may not be available on the NHS and you will have to pay for private treatment); and
- how much the treatment is going to cost (ask your dentist for a written estimate to avoid any misunderstanding).

Your dentist should explain the benefits and problems of any treatment they recommend and explain alternatives that may be available. They should also explain your dental records to you if you have any problems understanding them.

Remember that you can always refuse any treatment you do not want to have. However, if your dentist thinks it is treatment that you need, they may refuse to continue treating you. Your dentist cannot force you to accept treatment. You can stop the treatment if you are not satisfied with it or you don't want to continue with it for any other reason. If you can show that the treatment has been unsatisfactory you will not have to pay for it.

If you are paying for your treatment, dentists can ask for payment before or after you are treated. Check with your dentist what the arrangements are for paying. Most NHS treatment can be replaced like-for-like, if something goes wrong within a year. Make sure you check with your dentist what their policy is and whether your treatment will be replaced free of charge during that time if needed.

Going private

If you are having private dental treatment it might be a good idea to 'shop around' as charges can vary widely between different dentists. Private dentists have no fixed fees.

Private dental care is generally more expensive than NHS treatment. You should be able to get all the dental treatment you need to keep your mouth

healthy on the NHS. However, most dental practices will offer private treatment. Often they give a mixture of NHS and private treatment.

If you usually receive NHS dental care, you can only be given a mixture of NHS and private treatment if you give your dentist your signed agreement.

Information on the cost of private care should be available from your dentist or receptionist. There is no government help towards the cost of private dental treatment. Any help you are entitled to on the NHS does not apply if you have private treatment. If you are considering private dental treatment, always talk to your dentist about your choices and get an estimate of the proposed cost.

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) produces a leaflet called *Your guide to private dentistry*. It gives advice on choosing and paying for a private dentist. You can download a copy only from the Office of Fair Trading website at www.of.gov.uk

Private dental cover and budgeting schemes

There are various types of payment plan on offer to cover dental care fees; the most common are explained below. If you are thinking about taking out any budgeting scheme or insurance plan make sure you know exactly how much it will cost and what it will and will not cover.

Capitation schemes involve fixed monthly payments based on the amount of treatment your dentist thinks you will need. Once you have registered, you are given an initial health check. The dentist then assesses how much you should pay each month, depending on how much treatment you are likely to need in the future and the level of cover you want. However, more expensive treatment may not be covered by the plan. And you will need to pay for all the initial work that the dentist decides you need (to bring your mouth and teeth 'up to standard') before you can take out a plan. The purpose of most plans is to keep your mouth and teeth healthy, not to repair existing damage.

If you pay into a **cash payment dental cover plan**, you will receive cash payments to go towards your dental care and treatment. You do not usually need to have your teeth checked before you take out this type of dental plan. But the cash you receive will not necessarily cover the cost of all of the treatment you need. This is because the sum paid out is usually fixed at a certain level for each type of treatment.

Some **private medical insurance** covers certain dental surgical treatments. If

you have private medical cover, check your insurance documents.

If you have a complaint about dental treatment you received privately, you could contact the Dental Complaints Service on 08456 120540 or visit www.dentalcomplaints.org.uk

Dental care for people in care homes

Your care home has a duty to look after your health, welfare and quality of life. This includes arranging access to dental services according to your need. If you live in a care home and are not an NHS patient at a local dental practice, discuss your dental care needs with your care home manager, who should be able to tell you what regular or emergency dental care provision is available for you.

If you **permanently live in a care home**, you may qualify for help towards dental charges under the **NHS low income scheme**. You may be entitled to help if you are on a low income, and if you have less than £22,250 in savings (£21,500 in Scotland and Wales)*. To apply for help, fill in form HC1(SC) which you can get from your dentist's receptionist or your local benefits office. If you are in England, Scotland or Wales you can get the form HC1(SC) from PPA Patient Services on **0845 850 1166**.

* If you are reading this after 6 April 2009, you should check to see if these figures have changed.

Other primary care services

Chiropodists provide foot care – treatment for things such as bunions, corns and ingrowing toenails. You may be entitled to chiropody treatment on the NHS; ask your doctor for details. More information is given in our free advice leaflet, *Fitter Feet*.

Community psychiatric nurses provide nursing care at home for people with mental health problems and can provide support for their families.

Continence advisers can offer specialist advice and help on incontinence. There are a range of aids and equipment which can make it far easier to cope with incontinence, and, with the help of a continence advisor, the problem can often be cured altogether. More information is given in our free advice leaflet, *Bladder and Bowel Weakness*.

Dieticians offer general advice on healthy eating. They can also give specialist advice to people who have illnesses that are affected by diet, such as irritable bowel syndrome or heart disease. For more information on eating a balanced diet, see our free advice leaflet, *Healthy Eating*.

District nurses can provide nursing care at home: for example, attending to dressings, caring for pressure sores, giving injections, ear syringing and arranging help with bathing (if there is a medical reason for needing help with bathing).

Health visitors can provide general advice on health: for example, coping with special diets or preventing constipation.

NHS Walk-in Centres have opened in some towns and cities in England. These are for people who have minor injuries and illnesses and they can also offer health information and advice. The Walk-in Centres are run by NHS nurses. They are open from early morning to late evening, seven days a week. You don't need to make an appointment to visit a Walk-in Centre. To find out if there is one in your area call NHS Direct on 0845 4647.

Occupational therapists can help older or disabled people cope with everyday activities such as cooking and dressing which may have become difficult. They can assess your need for equipment such as a seat in your bath, special taps which are easier to turn on, cutlery with large handles for arthritic hands and so on. Occupational therapists are also involved in advising on house adaptations to make life easier for older and disabled people. You can usually contact an occupational therapist through your local council social services department (social work department in Scotland, or your local health and social services trust if you live in Northern Ireland) or your doctor.

Optometrists (often called opticians) carry out eye tests to check on the health of your eyes. They also prescribe lenses for glasses or contact lenses. If you are over 60 you can have a free eye test. Some people are also entitled to an NHS voucher to help pay towards the cost of glasses and contact lenses. You should be able to get a home visit from an optician if you are unable to leave the house. For further information on optometrists see our free advice leaflet, *Better Sight*.

Palliative care nurses, such as Macmillan or Marie Curie nurses who specialise in caring for those who have cancer, often provide palliative care in the patient's own home.

Pharmacists (also known as chemists) can offer you advice on your medication and how it works. They can also offer advice on common complaints such as coughs, colds, aches and pains and other health issues, such as healthy eating. A pharmacist can help you decide if you need to see a doctor. You can just drop into your local pharmacy; you don't need to make an appointment.

Physiotherapists can give advice on equipment for daily living and exercises to help stiff joints and muscles. They can also help with conditions such as osteoporosis or asthma.

Practice nurses are employed by doctors' practices and are responsible for nursing care, health promotion and education. You will probably see your practice nurse for injections, including your flu and pneumonia jabs. Practice nurses also run specialist clinics within their doctor's practice: for example, diabetes or asthma clinics. The services that practice nurses provide vary from practice to practice.

Speech and language therapists can help if you have difficulties eating and swallowing: for example, as a result of a stroke, as well as helping with communication difficulties.

There are also many other community care services and social services to enable people to continue to live independently. For more information on how to get these services see our free advice leaflet, *Help in Your Home*.

Information and advice

You may need information about local services. For example, you may be looking for a surgery to register with or you may need to find out about dentists in your area. Or perhaps you need some advice on health issues, but don't think you necessarily need to visit your family doctor. There are different information services that you can contact depending on whether you live in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

- **England: NHS Direct** is a confidential health information service, open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You can contact NHS Direct for information about local health services in your area: for example, if you want to find a local dentist or surgery. You can also call NHS Direct and speak to a nurse for health advice. Call **0845 4647**. You can also visit its

website at www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

- NHS Direct provides a confidential translation service. If you want to use a language other than English call 0845 4647 and say the English name of the language you would prefer to use. Wait on the line until you are connected to an interpreter who can help the NHS Direct staff give you the information you need.
- **Wales:** If you are living in Wales, call **NHS Direct Wales** (Galw LECHYD Cymru) on **0845 4647**. You can choose either the Welsh or English language service. You could visit its website at www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk
- **Scotland:** Call **NHS 24** on **08454 24 24 24**. NHS 24 is a similar service to NHS Direct and is available across the whole of Scotland. You can call at any time of the day or night for information about local health services or to speak to a nurse for health advice. An interpretation service is available for people whose first language is not English. Its website is www.nhs24.com
- **Northern Ireland:** For information about local health services contact your local health and social services board (see page 21 for contact details). Unfortunately your local health and social services board cannot give health advice over the phone and is not open 24 hours a day.

There are also many specialist independent organisations that may be able to offer you information and advice on your health. For example, there are different charities providing advice and information on Alzheimer's disease, arthritis, heart problems, lung problems, cancer, strokes, hearing problems, diabetes, sight problems and depression. For contact details of the main national organisations see pages 20–26. The health information lines listed above should be able to tell you about these and other organisations in your local area. You can also call SeniorLine on **0808 800 6565** – the free advice service run by Help the Aged (call **0808 808 7575** if you are in Northern Ireland). SeniorLine advice workers can give you general advice on health services and health benefits. They can also give you information about the different organisations offering more specialist health advice.

Age Concern and Help the Aged publishes a wide variety of advice leaflets and information sheets on health issues, including sight, hearing, incontinence, health benefits and shingles. For further information contact:

- Help the Aged Information Resources Team: **020 7278 1114** (address on page 27); or
- Age Concern Information Line: **0800 00 99 66**.

Complaining about the NHS

If you are not happy with the treatment you have received, or have been refused treatment on the NHS, you can make a complaint. Often it is best to try to sort out the problem informally if you can by talking to the staff at the service involved.

But if you do not want to do this or it does not help, you can use the **NHS complaints procedure** to make a formal complaint. You can use this procedure to complain about your NHS doctor, nurse, dentist, pharmacist, optician or any other NHS service you are unhappy with. For more information, see our information sheet no. 27, *How to Make a Complaint*.

Useful contacts

Health information

England:

NHS Direct – 0845 4647 (textphone: 0845 606 4647)

Web: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Wales:

NHS Direct Wales – 0845 4647 (textphone: 0845 606 4647)

Web: www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

Health of Wales Information Service

Web: www.wales.nhs.uk/

Scotland:

NHS 24 – 08454 242424

Web: www.nhs24.com

Northern Ireland:

Local health and social services boards:

Eastern Health and Social Services Board

12–22 Linenhall Street
Belfast BT2 8BS
Tel: 028 9032 1313
Textphone: 028 9032 4980
Web: www.ehssb.n-i.nhs.uk

Northern Health and Social Services Board

County Hall, 182 Galgorm Road
Ballymena BT42 1QB
Tel: 028 2531 1000
Helpline: 0845 762 6428
Textphone: 028 2531 1001
Web: www.nhssb.n-i.nhs.uk

Southern Health and Social Services Board

Tower Hill
Armagh BT61 9DR
Tel: 028 3741 0041
Textphone: 028 3741 4530
Web: www.shssb.org

Western Health and Social Services Board

15 Gransha Park
Clooney Road
Londonderry BT47 6FN
Tel: 028 7186 0086
Web: www.whssb.n-i.nhs.uk

General information and advice

Citizens Advice

For your local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) look in your phone book; or visit the national CAB advice website www.adviceguide.org.uk

The Patients Association

PO Box 935
Harrow
Middlesex HA1 3YJ
Helpline: 0845 608 4455
Web: www.patients-association.org.uk

Voluntary organisations which provide advice and information on health

Action for Blind People

14–16 Verney Road
London SE16 3DZ
Helpline: 0800 915 4666
Web: www.actionforblindpeople.org

Action for Blind People runs a free information and advice service national helpline and can advise on many issues associated with visual impairment.

Age Concern Information Line

FREEPOST (SWB30375)
Ashburton
Devon TQ13 7ZZ
Helpline: 0800 00 99 66
Web: www.ageconcern.org.uk

Age Concern provides information sheets and factsheets in a number of areas, which affect older people.

Alzheimer's Society

Devon House
58 St. Katharine's Way
London E1W 1JX
Tel: 020 7423 3500
Helpline: 0845 300 0336
Web: www.alzheimers.org.uk

Alzheimer Scotland

22 Drumsheugh Gardens
Edinburgh EH3 7RN
Helpline: 0808 808 3000 (open 24 hours)
Web: www.alzscot.org.uk

Alzheimer's Society and Alzheimer Scotland offer advice, information and support to people with dementia, their families and carers through its helpline and local branches.

Arthritis Care

18 Stephenson Way
London NW1 2HD
Tel: 020 7380 6500
Helpline: 0808 800 4050
Web: www.arthritiscare.org.uk

Arthritis Care has approximately 250 branches around the country. It runs a helpline for people living with arthritis and produces a range of useful leaflets and factsheets.

British Heart Foundation

Greater London House
180 Hampstead Road
London NW1 7AW
Heart helpline: 0300 330 3311
Web: www.bhf.org.uk

The British Heart Foundation offers advice, information and support through publications, heart health magazine and its Heart helpline.

British Lung Foundation

73–75 Goswell Road
London EC1V 7ER
Tel: 020 7688 5555
Helpline: 0845 850 5020
Web: www.lunguk.org

British Lung Foundation produces a range of leaflets, booklets and information sheets on lung health issues. It has a network of local support groups for people affected by lung conditions.

Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland

65 North Castle Street
Edinburgh EH2 3LT
Tel: 0131 225 6963
Advice line: 0845 077 6000
Web: www.chss.org.uk

Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland helps people affected by chest, heart and stroke illness by providing advice and information and support in the community.

Diabetes UK

Macleod House
10 Parkway
London NW1 7AA
Careline: 0845 120 2960
Web: www.diabetes.org.uk

Diabetes UK runs a range of support services including telephone counselling and local support groups. It also produce factsheets and information sheets on diabetes.

Hearing Concern Link

The Resource Centre
356 Holloway Road
London N7 6PA
Helpline: 01323 638230
Textphone: 01323 739998
Web: www.hearingconcernlink.org.uk

Hearing Concern provides advice and information to people affected by hearing loss.

Macmillan Cancer Support

89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7UQ
Tel: 020 7840 7840
Helpline: 0808 500 800
Web: www.macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support offers free publications for people with cancer, their families and friends and provides local care and practical support.

Mind Info Line

PO Box 277

Manchester M60 3XN

Info Line: 0845 766 0163

Web: www.mind.org.uk

Mind Info Line produces booklets and factsheets on a wide range of mental health issues. It can also give details of support services available in your local area.

Parkinson's Disease Society

215 Vauxhall Bridge Road

London SW1V 1EJ

Helpline: 0808 800 0303

Web: www.parkinsons.org.uk

Parkinson's Disease Society has a helpline staffed by nurses, produces information sheets and publications and has a network of local support groups.

RNIB (Royal National Institute of the Blind)

105 Judd Street

London WC1H 9NE

Helpline: 0845 766 9999

Web: www.rnib.org.uk

RNIB provides a range of services, advice and information, including leaflets and publications, many of which are available in large print, Braille and Moon. It can also give details of local sight loss support organisations.

RNID

19–23 Featherstone Street

London EC1Y 8SL

Information Line: 0808 808 0123 (textphone: 0808 808 9000)

Tinnitus helpline: 0808 808 6666 (textphone: 0808 808 0007)

Web: www.rnid.org.uk

RNID for deaf and hard of hearing people, provides advice and support for people with hearing loss through its information helpline, tinnitus helpline and range of factsheets.

The Stroke Association

Stroke House

240 City Road

London EC1V 2PR

Helpline: 0845 3033 100

Web: www.stroke.org.uk

The Stroke Association provides community support in some areas and provides patient leaflets for people affected by stroke.

For further information contact:

Information Resources Team
Help the Aged
207–221 Pentonville Road
London N1 9UZ
Tel: 020 7278 1114

If you have access to the internet you can download our advice leaflets and information sheets by logging on to **www.helptheaged.org.uk**

SeniorLine is the free welfare rights advice and information service run by Help the Aged for older people and their carers. Trained advice workers offer free, confidential and impartial advice about:

- welfare and disability benefits
- care at home
- residential care
- housing options and adaptations
- access to health and community services.

Freephone: **0808 800 6565**

Textphone: **0800 26 96 26**

9am to 4pm, Monday to Friday

If you are in **Northern Ireland**, contact **SeniorLine** on **0808 808 7575**.

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Last updated: April 2009 (GP)

Next update due: April 2010

Age Concern England (charity number 261794) has merged with Help the Aged (charity number 272786) to form Age UK, a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England: registered office address 207–221 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9UZ, company number 6825798, registered charity number 1128267. Age Concern and Help the Aged are brands of Age UK. The three national Age Concerns in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have also merged with Help the Aged in these nations to form three registered charities: Age Scotland, Age Northern Ireland, Age Cymru.