



# **“I need to see a doctor!”**

**Top tips for accessing  
your GP practice**

**healthwatch**  
Sunderland

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## Introduction

Many people are contacting us about making appointments at their GP surgery but can be very confused about:

- How can they access this service?
- Who are the different professionals working in their practice?
- Who is available to see?

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

Relevant QR codes and links in the digital document are provided for you to access additional information about your chosen subject. 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 referring to all the services provided by your GP surgery and not just those from a GP.

**'Triage'** is a term that is used to describe an assessment of needs to help direct a patient to the right health care professional within primary care. This is usually done over the telephone.

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**GP Practice services have changed to meet increasing demand and respond to local health care needs. They have done this by expanding the workforce, to include more specialist roles that work alongside GPs in general practice and improve the offer for patients.**



## Responding to your queries

The following sections are in response to what the public regularly ask us:

What we hear from the public:

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

Reception staff have access to a range of health care professionals and services as GP Practices now have more roles working in practices that can help patients. The information you provide will be treated professionally and confidentially to help the practice team book the best appointment for you, with the most appropriate person, as this isn't always the GP. You can help by providing as much information as you can whether this is over the phone or using an online service.

You can still request an appointment specifically with your GP rather than take an appointment with the most suitable member of the primary care team. If this is your preference, you are likely to wait longer.

## Additional roles in practices

Individual GP practices decide what additional roles will benefit their patients and support services that GPs provide. These can be shared between GP practices. They may have one or more of these roles available. This means there will be more choice of health care professionals that you can access, and 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 help to provide capacity, and expertise to support patients. 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 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 alongside people to coach and motivate them to implement their personalised health and care plan.

### Social prescribers

Social prescribers 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 compliment 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.

## **Podiatrists**

Podiatrists have been trained to diagnose and treat foot and lower limb conditions. They provide assessment, evaluation, and foot care for a wide range of patients. If your GP practice doesn't have an in-house podiatrist your GP can refer you to a podiatrist in the community.

## **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.

## **Dietitians**

Dietitians diagnose and treat diet 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. If your GP practice doesn't have an in-house dietitian your GP can refer you to a dietitian.

## **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.

## **Digital and transformational 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 this QR code or visit:**

[www.england.nhs.uk/gp/expanding-our-workforce/](http://www.england.nhs.uk/gp/expanding-our-workforce/)



# 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?”**

Everyone in England can register for free at a GP practice and you don't need to have a fixed address to do so.

Scan this QR code to find out more about how to register with a GP practice or visit:  
[www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/gps/how-to-register-with-a-gp-surgery/](http://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/gps/how-to-register-with-a-gp-surgery/)



Scan this QR code to find a GP practice or visit:  
[www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-gp](http://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-gp)



If you have problems registering with a GP:

- pop into your local GP practice and the team will assist you with registering.
- call the NHS England Customer Contact Centre on 0300 311 22 33.
- or contact Healthwatch Sunderland on 0191 514 7145.

You can also register or find a GP in Sunderland here:

[www.sunderlandhealthandwellnesshub.nhs.uk/local-services/](http://www.sunderlandhealthandwellnesshub.nhs.uk/local-services/)



# Making an appointment

## What we hear from the public:

**“I am unable to get through to my GP practice using the telephone!”**

There are many ways to make an appointment. These include:

## 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, please be patient as you will get through eventually. You can also use your surgery’s call back service which will hold your place in the queue and a member of the reception team will call you back.

If you don't need an urgent appointment, you can help by phoning later in the day which may be less busy.

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

## In person

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

## Using online health services

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

Online systems will enable you to:

- Book / cancel / review appointments.
- Request repeat prescriptions.
- Access parts of your health record 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.

**“Check your surgery website to find out what online systems they use and choose one with a system that suits you.”**

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 inform their decision to see you in person.



Should the information you submit into the electronic system, indicate 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.

Some 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 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 to practice open hours) to help with the management of patient submissions.

## **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.

You can also self-refer to several services through the Sunderland Health & Wellness Hub.

## **NHS App**

This system is available to all patients who 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 helpful information and advice.

Scan the QR code for more information about the range of digital service or visit: [www.nhs.uk/nhs-app/](http://www.nhs.uk/nhs-app/).



You will need access to a computer, tablet, or smartphone for digital healthcare access. You can also contact your local Healthwatch for information (contact details are at the back of this resource).



**Not sure where to go for health and wellness advice?**

**Trusted NHS health information is just a click away...**

Visit the new Sunderland Health and Wellness Hub online and find lots of information about local healthcare services.

Find us online at [www.shwh.co.uk](http://www.shwh.co.uk)



**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 recommended to call 111, go to an Urgent Care Centre or Emergency Department. 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, to avoid delay.

**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. [www.thinkpharmacyfirst.health/](http://www.thinkpharmacyfirst.health/)



If you are unsure about what you might need, your practice team can help direct 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 consider viewing 111 online (find out more by scanning this QR code) or use the eConsultation service on your practice's website for more self-help guidance.

[www.111.nhs.uk/](http://www.111.nhs.uk/)



Scan this QR code to access A-Z of conditions, symptoms, and treatments and your NHS account or visit: [www.nhs.uk/](http://www.nhs.uk/)

**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 and one is available. You may initially be offered a telephone or video appointment 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 of your preference, especially if this reduces barriers to effective communication, 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.

## Enhanced access service

Enhanced access offers appointments

- Monday to Friday 6.30pm and 8.30pm,
- Saturday 9am and 5pm,
- Bank holidays 10am and 2pm.

This appointment may not be at your usual GP practice. Enhanced access appointments can be booked through your GP practice.

### What we hear from the public:

#### **“Why, when I get through to the practice 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, which will help alleviate this issue to some extent.

## 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 prior to needing 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 specific or supported means of communication.

If you need to speak in private with your doctor's receptionist, please ask if you can have this conversation away from the reception desk.

## 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 convey 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 if relevant, your preferred method of communication.

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

### Accessible information standards

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



[www.england.nhs.uk/publication/accessible-information-standard-overview-20172018/](http://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/accessible-information-standard-overview-20172018/)

### What we hear from the public:

### “How do I give feedback?”

All GP practices have a website with details of how to contact them. It is not possible to supply direct email addresses for your practice due to patient safety and the risk of messages not being read due to high volume.

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 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

These are equally important. Please tell your GP practice what they are doing well or if something they did was particularly helpful, let your practice know so they can try to do more of this for you and for others.

Has a health professional, care professional, or team gone the extra mile for you or someone you know?

If so, you could nominate them for a Healthwatch Sunderland Star Award for the difference they have made.

To find out more about the awards and how you can submit a nomination scan the QR code or visit: [www.healthwatchesunderland.com/nominate-star-0](http://www.healthwatchesunderland.com/nominate-star-0)



## Complaints

Your local Healthwatch has information about how to make a complaint and you can find more information by scanning this QR code or visit: [www.healthwatchesunderland.com/help-making-complaint](http://www.healthwatchesunderland.com/help-making-complaint)



VoiceAbility can also help support you to make a complaint through their free Independent Complaints Advocacy Service. For further information about VoiceAbility, please scan this QR code or visit: [www.voiceability.org/support-and-help/services-by-location/sunderland](http://www.voiceability.org/support-and-help/services-by-location/sunderland)



All GP practices will have a complaints process, and you can get this information by contacting them directly or on their website. In the first instance, it is usually best to try to find a resolution to your problem directly with the practice by speaking to a member of the practice management team. This ensures your complaint receives the full consideration and response it requires.

## Patient record keeping

### What we hear from the public:

**“How do I know that my records are correct and up to date and information sharing, necessary for my continued wellbeing, is properly flagged and 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 the QR code to find out more information about accessing your NHS health records or visit:



[www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/about-the-nhs/how-to-get-your-medical-records/](http://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/about-the-nhs/how-to-get-your-medical-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 this QR code to find out more information or visit:

[www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/comm-carers/carers/](http://www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/comm-carers/carers/)



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

- They use NHS carers quality markers to improve services.
- Personalise services by considering individual needs using carers’ passports.
- 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 this QR code to be completed and handed in at your GP practice or visit: [www.wecareyoucare.info/](http://www.wecareyoucare.info/)



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 this QR code or visit: [www.gov.uk/power-of-attorney](http://www.gov.uk/power-of-attorney)



For more information about local unpaid carers support services, carers rights etc please scan this QR code or visit: [www.sunderlandcarers.co.uk](http://www.sunderlandcarers.co.uk)





## Patients with learning disability and autistic people

Your practice should offer an annual health check 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 the QR code or visit:



[www.nhs.uk/conditions/learning-disabilities/annual-health-checks/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/learning-disabilities/annual-health-checks/)

Young people between 14 and 25 are frequently not taking up the opportunity to attend their health checks locally. It is important to consider accepting this invite because people with learning disability can have poorer physical and mental health than the general population, as well as reduced life expectancy due to treatable and preventable ill health.

An annual health check is an ideal opportunity to discuss any concerns you may have about your health and well-being, and to get checks, vaccines, screening, treatments and health advice etc. A health action plan should be provided as part of this process, which outlines the details for your personal health and well-being plan going forward.



For easy-read information about annual health checks please scan this QR code or visit: [www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-06/AHC%20Easy%20Read%20Guide%20Final.pdf](http://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-06/AHC%20Easy%20Read%20Guide%20Final.pdf)

Although GP practices will provide an annual health check for those with learning disability and autistic people, there is no requirement to provide annual health checks 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, 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, or your GP practice online service. 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 the QR code or visit: [www.nhs.uk/nhs-app](http://www.nhs.uk/nhs-app)



It is really 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 I need with an NHS prescription?”**

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 please scan the QR code or visit: [www.nhs.uk/nhs-app/nhs-app-help-and-support/prescriptions-in-the-nhs-app/nominating-a-pharmacy](https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-app/nhs-app-help-and-support/prescriptions-in-the-nhs-app/nominating-a-pharmacy)



Repeat prescriptions are regularly reviewed and your GP practice will discuss this if it affects you. If you have any queries about what you have been prescribed, you must take this up with your practice as your community pharmacy is unable to make any changes to prescriptions.

You can speak to community pharmacies directly for more information about the specific treatments and services they offer as each one can differ, scan this QR code to find out more about your local community pharmacies or visit: [www.nhs.uk/service-search/pharmacy/find-a-pharmacy](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/pharmacy/find-a-pharmacy)



Community pharmacies can supply most medications if you need them in an emergency outside of GP practice hours. Scan this QR code or visit [www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/prescriptions-and-pharmacies/pharmacies/out-of-hours-medicines/](https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/prescriptions-and-pharmacies/pharmacies/out-of-hours-medicines/) 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 Sunderland who will provide you with the relevant information.**



## 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



## Emergency Department or 999

### For emergencies only

Choking | Chest pain | Blacking out  
Serious blood loss

# Healthwatch Sunderland

Healthwatch Sunderland is your local health and social care champion. We make sure NHS and social care leaders, and decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.

## Information & signposting

The information provided in this document is in response to queries received from the public across Sunderland over the past year.

If you are a member of the public and have any queries about any aspect of health and care across the Sunderland area, please contact our Information & Signposting service.

## Contact us

**Call: 0191 514 7145**

**Text only service: 07418 364 340**

**Email: [healthwatchesunderland@pcp.uk.net](mailto:healthwatchesunderland@pcp.uk.net)**

Our service is covered on weekdays between 9am and 4pm.

To find out more about us including

- find out more about our work;
- receive updates about local health and care services;
- join in with local consultations;
- hear about local community activities.



Visit our website by scanning the QR code or visit [www.healthwatchesunderland.com](http://www.healthwatchesunderland.com) and sign up to our newsletter at the bottom of our home page.

# Acknowledgements

## Thank you

Thank you to Healthwatch Middlesbrough and Healthwatch Redcar & Cleveland for allowing us to use information from their 'I want to see a GP guide'.



**healthwatch**  
Sunderland