

GPs

What to expect from your doctor

Usually, the first step to getting help if you feel you are having problems with your mental health is visiting your general practitioners' (GP) surgery. A GP is a doctor who can give you treatment and care for your physical and mental health. This factsheet gives information on what to expect from a GP appointment and what your GP can do for you.



- GPs can provide treatment for mental health problems and offer ongoing care and support.
- Sometimes it is worth asking whether there is a particular GP at your surgery who has an interest or speciality in mental health problems.
- Before an appointment, it can be helpful to write down a list of things you'd like to ask or discuss with the GP. This could be writing down a list of symptoms or perhaps side effects from medication.
- A GP will ask you about your mental and physical health and may make a diagnosis.
- You can change GPs as long as it is within your catchment area.

This factsheet covers:

1. [Preparing for a GP appointment](#)
2. [What happens at an appointment?](#)
3. [What happens next?](#)
4. [What should I do if I have any problems?](#)
5. [What if I am a carer, friend or relative?](#)
6. [Other ways of getting help](#)

1. Preparing for a GP appointment

What if I don't have a GP?

You need to be registered with a local GP surgery to see a GP, if you are not already registered with one. You can find your local surgeries on the following NHS Choices page:

www.nhs.uk/servicedirectories/Pages/ServiceSearch.aspx, or by calling 'NHS 111' on 111. You will need to be in a surgery's catchment area. This is the local area that the surgery covers.

You can register by filling out a form that the reception will give you. You might also be able to do this online. They will ask you general questions such as your name and address, date of birth, and details of your previous GP. You can also register temporarily if you are only planning to be in the area for less than three months.¹

Sometimes you can see a GP by going to local health centres that offer a walk-in service. The useful contacts section at the end of this factsheet has information on where you can find these services.

Making an appointment

Once you are registered, you can then make an appointment to see someone. Usually, there are different GPs who all work in the same surgery, alongside other professionals such as nurses and therapists. You can make an appointment to see the first GP available. Or, if you are a returning patient, then you can arrange to make an appointment with someone you've already seen or a particular GP you prefer.

You can ask the receptionist if there is a GP with an interest or background in mental health and ask to see them. You do not need to tell the receptionist what you are making an appointment about. If they ask, you can say that you'd prefer not to say. You can also ask to see a male or female GP.

The waiting time for an appointment to see a GP can vary. It can be a few weeks. This depends on how busy the surgery is. If you need to see someone urgently, then you may be able to arrange an emergency appointment through the surgery's reception. If you prefer to see someone particular then you might have to wait a while for an available appointment.

At some surgeries you can ask for a telephone appointment where a GP will contact you over the phone to discuss your problems or any follow-up care. If this is easier for you then you could check with the surgery, although some GPs might still ask for you to visit them directly to discuss matters face to face.

Before the appointment

It can help to write down a list of things you'd like to ask or discuss with the GP. This can be especially useful if you are feeling anxious or worried, and could help you remember the questions that are important to you. You could think about writing down a list of your symptoms, and noting whether they might get worse at certain times or when you do certain things.

You might want to think about how you're feeling and how your mood affects your day to day life. A useful way of noting this sort of information can be a mood diary. We have included a sample mood diary at the end of this factsheet, which you may want to use or change for your own needs. It could also be useful to make a note of anything else important, such as any medication you're taking at the moment.

Can I take someone with me?

Yes. This might be a close friend, relative or advocate. An advocate is someone outside of the NHS who can offer you support with going along to appointments and making your voice heard.

If you wanted, you could bring a friend or relative with you to the surgery for support while you are waiting but go into your appointment on your own.

[Top](#)

2. What happens at an appointment?

During the appointment, it is important to be as honest as possible and to give the GP as much detail as you can about how you're feeling or how your symptoms are affecting you. They will ask you about your mental and physical health and may make a diagnosis.

You will normally have around 10 minutes to spend with your GP. For some, this time can be too short and you might feel that you can't get everything across. You can ask for a longer appointment when you book if you feel you have a complex problem or need to talk about a number of things.

Your GP will consider different options to get you help for your mental health, depending on your symptoms. These might include:

- giving advice on things like sleep or stress
- prescribing medication
- passing your details on to a talking therapy service
- passing your details on to a specialist mental health team.

NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) produce guidelines for NHS services on how they should treat certain conditions. There are guidelines for many mental health problems. You can download

these from their website at www.nice.org.uk. These can tell you what is recommended and how your GP should manage your treatment and care.

It is always worth asking why you have been given a certain treatment. If you are given any medication, your GP should tell you how it should help you and about any side effects it may cause. Ask how effective it is and what you should do if it isn't working. You could also ask if there is anything else you can do to help yourself.

You can also take this opportunity to ask for advice on:

- smoking
- alcohol or drugs
- exercise
- diet
- flu jabs.

Your GP will make a note of your symptoms, any treatment you have been given and anything else you discuss in your appointment. They will record this on your medical notes. These notes will be kept confidential. This means they should not pass it on to anyone else unless you agree or it is necessary to. You can find more information in our factsheet '**Confidentiality**', which you can download for free from www.rethink.org or call 0300 5000 927 and request that a copy is sent to you.

Your treatment and care through your GP is free, but you may need to pay for a prescription if you need medication. You can find out more about prescriptions on NHS Choices: <http://www.nhs.uk/nhsengland/Healthcosts/pages/Prescriptioncosts.aspx>.

[Top](#)

3. What happens next?

If you have any problems with your treatment, you are not getting better or if your symptoms start to get worse, then you should make a follow-up appointment with your GP. You can ask to arrange the next appointment whilst with the GP if you'd prefer.

If you have been given medication then your GP should offer check ups to see how it is working and how you are feeling.

Your GP may need to pass your details to a specialist mental health team to get more experienced help. This is usually if your GP:

- has tried all options and you are still having problems with your mental health
- feels your problems are too complex for them to deal with
- feels you are at risk of suicide or self-harm.

If you were with a mental health team under the Care Programme Approach (CPA) and have been discharged, then your GP will take over your mental health care.²

Physical health

If you have been passed onto mental health services, your GP should still look after your general care needs including physical health. Your GP should work closely with any professionals you see under mental health services.

If you have a severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, your GP should do a physical health check for you every year.³ Research shows that people with severe mental illness are at higher risk of certain physical health conditions.⁴

GP surgeries usually hold a register of all patients at the practice who have severe mental illness (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and other psychotic conditions), which remind the GP or nurse to contact you when a check is due.⁵ A health check may include taking your blood pressure, taking your pulse, doing a urine or blood test or weighing you.

You can find out more about physical health in our '**Good health guide**', which you can download from www.rethink.org.

[Top](#)

4. What should I do if I have any problems?

Most people find that their GPs are supportive and helpful with mental health problems. However, you may feel that your GP has not understood your problems, not listened to you or seemed unsympathetic. If you're having problems with your GP, you could try the following options.

Change GPs

You could think about seeing a different GP.

You could check with the receptionist if there is another GP at the surgery with an interest or background in mental health. You could arrange any follow up appointments with them instead.

If there is not another GP at your surgery that you feel comfortable seeing or if you would like to change surgery, check if there is another surgery in your local area.

Ask for more support

GP surgeries have to be flexible to help people with mental illness. Sometimes you might want to ask for changes in the way they support you.

For example you could ask to:

- book your appointment later in the day. If your surgery only offers same-day appointments, you usually have to phone first thing in the morning. If you are on certain medications you may not be able to get up at this time. You could ask to book the appointment later
- get appointment reminders if you think you might forget your appointment due to your condition. The surgery could send you a text or give you an appointment card
- wait in a different waiting area, maybe where it's quieter. If you find it difficult to wait for your appointment with other patients, it is reasonable to ask for this
- have a longer appointment.

If you need to, you could mention that surgeries have to make these changes because of the Equality Act 2010. They are called 'reasonable adjustments'. You can find more information in our '**Whats reasonable? GP Toolkit**', which you can download from www.rethink.org.

Advocacy

An advocate could help you explore these options. An advocate is someone independent from health services who can help to make your voice heard.

There may be a local advocacy service in your area which you can contact for support. You can search online for a local service or the Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service could search for you.

If you feel unhappy with how your care is being handled, then you could contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS), who can try to sort out any problems or questions you have. Your GP surgery should be able to give you their details, but you can also find your local office details through the website in the 'useful contacts' section of this factsheet.

Make a complaint

You can complain if you are not happy with your GP or the surgery. You can find our more information in our '**Complaints – NHS or social services**' factsheet which you can download for free from www.rethink.org. Or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

[Top](#)

5. What if I am a carer, friend or relative?

If you are a carer, friend or relative of someone and are worried about their mental health, you may wish to share information with their health professional, such as their GP. Unless the person consents, their GP

cannot discuss their confidential information with you, except in very limited situations.

There is no rule that says a GP cannot listen to your concerns, as this can help GPs to give the right care or know more about someone's problems. However a GP would not be able to tell you whether they took any action, and they might also tell your loved one that you have been in touch. This is in the General Medical Council guidance on confidentiality for doctors.⁶ You can find out more information in our '**Confidentiality and information sharing – for carers, friends and family**' factsheet. You can download this for free from www.rethink.org.

If you have concerns about someone you know but they are refusing to seek help, then you may wish to read our factsheet '**Are you worried about someone's mental health**'.

[Top](#)

6. Other ways of getting help

It may be that you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis and needs to see someone sooner than waiting for an appointment with a GP. If so, your surgery may have an out-of-hours telephone service to contact or you could call NHS 111 on 111. You could also go to the nearest hospital's emergency department or try to get help from the local crisis resolution team.

You can find out more about how to get help for your own mental health in our '**Are you worried about your mental health**' factsheet. You can download this from www.rethink.org.

You can find our more information on how to get urgent help for someone else in our '**Getting help in a crisis**' factsheet.

[Top](#)



The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) produces guidance for the NHS on how to treat certain mental health conditions. There are versions of these guidelines specifically written for patients and carers. These will include how your GP should manage your treatment. You can download these for free from the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk) or get hard copies by contacting NICE publications on 0845 003 7783.

You can search for GP-led walk in health centres on the following NHS Choices page: www.nhs.uk/servicedirectories/Pages/ServiceSearch.aspx, or by calling NHS 111 on 111.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Web: [www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Patient-advice-and-liaison-services-\(PALS\)/LocationSearch/363](http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Patient-advice-and-liaison-services-(PALS)/LocationSearch/363)

General Medical Council

Web: www.gmc-uk.org/index.asp

[Top](#)



Date of appointment: _____

Time of appointment: _____

Longer appointment needed? Yes No

How am I feeling?

Mood chart – Use this to record how you feel over the course of a few days or a fortnight

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13	Day 14
😊														
😐														
😞														

What would I like from the appointment?

Medication I'm taking:

Am I experiencing side effects from any medication?

- No
 Yes (What are these?)

Would I like to change my medication?

- No
 Yes



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- ¹ How do I register with a GP? NHS Choices (2014)
<http://www.nhs.uk/chq/Pages/1095.aspx?CategoryID=68&SubCategoryID=158>. (Accessed September 2014)
- ² Department of Health. *Refocusing the Care Programme Approach: Policy and Positive Practice Guidance*. London: Department of Health (2008)
- ³ National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence 2009. Core interventions in the treatment and management of schizophrenia in primary and secondary care (update). Clinical Guidance 82. London: National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence
- National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence 2006. Bipolar disorder: The management of bipolar disorder in adults, children and adolescents, in primary and secondary care. Clinical Guidance 38. London: National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence
- ⁴ Disability Rights Commission (2006) *Equal Treatment: Closing the Gap*, London, Disability Rights Commission
- ⁵ British Medical Association. *General medical services, contract quality and outcomes framework 2014-2015*. March 2014.
- ⁶ Confidentiality: guidance for doctors, General Medical Council (2009) para 66. Available at http://www.gmc-uk.org/static/documents/content/Confidentiality_0910.pdf. (Accessed September 2014)

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in large print.



Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927

Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Email advice@rethink.org

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

RAIS
PO Box 17106
Birmingham B9 9LL

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9:30am to 4pm
Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



Leading the way to a better
quality of life for everyone
affected by severe mental illness.

For further information
on Rethink Mental Illness
Phone 0121 522 7007
Email info@rethink.org



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www.rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to www.rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0300 5000 927 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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