

# Access to general practice communications toolkit

June 2021

This toolkit is correct at the time of publishing but may be updated to reflect changes in advice in the context of COVID-19. Any changes since its first publication in September 2020 are highlighted in yellow.

This toolkit has been developed to support general practice, primary care networks and clinical commissioning groups to explain to patients how they can safely access general practice.

There are currently several priorities:

- Being clear that practices are open, and that face-to-face appointments remain available to patients, but **to keep people safe they** are working differently
- Helping to explain the difference between online/remote triage (navigation) and remote consultations
- Ensuring patients continue to receive the same services they would normally receive from a GP practice wherever there is a clinical need and **that patients receive the right care from the right person at the right time**

## Background

COVID-19 has changed how patients access their GP. The pandemic has super charged the use of remote consultations in primary care. These will never replace face-to-face appointments which should be available to patients where appropriate. However, remote consultations can be a convenient way for people to access medical advice and treatment. Video consultations are available in GP practices covering 99% of the population in England. Meanwhile, online consultations, where a patient can contact their GP practice directly via the internet, are now available in 95% of GP practices ([Appointments in General Practice, December 2020](#)). We want patients to continue to benefit from the increased accessibility of GP services using online consultation requests and being able to have appointments remotely (telephone, video and messaging) with their GP practice. Many patients find these convenient and easy to use. While we don't want to reverse the strides that have been made

towards remote consultations, we need to make clear to patients that face-to-face appointments are there for those who need them. The choice of appointment mode should also take account of patient preferences and the access they have to the internet and telephone. Patients should also have the option of coming to the practice in person while adhering to social distancing and IPC guidance. Receptions will not yet feel like they did pre-pandemic – for example where space is very constrained, patients may be asked to wait outside.

Patients should be treated consistently regardless of mode of access. Ideally, a patient attending the practice reception should be triaged or navigated to the right care offer on the same basis as they would be via phone or via an online consultation system.

We know the way patients access GP services is complex and one size does not fit all. Practices should continue to engage with their practice population regarding access models and should actively adapt their processes as appropriate in response to feedback.

We developed the [Help Us Help You](#) campaigns in recognition that some patients may be reluctant to come forward with health concerns, particularly for non-urgent issues. This risks serious health issues being left undiagnosed or untreated. The Help Us Help You campaigns aim to encourage patients to come forward and also to direct them to the most appropriate support, including NHS 111 for out of hours care.

Recent campaign material:

- [General practice multi-disciplinary teams](#)
- [Accessing mental health services](#)
- [Accessing cancer services](#)

## Key patient messaging

- General practice is here for you, but how you contact your GP surgery might be different at the moment. Face-to-face appointments are available to patients where there is a clinical need. **If you have a strong preference that your consultation is carried out face-to-face then please talk to your practice.** You will be asked to first discuss your conditions over the phone or online with a member of the healthcare team to assess what would be most appropriate for you and which practice member would best provide it.
- Most GP practices are also offering online consultations and video consultations, as well as telephone and **face-to-face consultations.** These can be convenient and flexible ways to receive healthcare. If you have a preference about how to access care you can discuss it with your practice.

- You can attend the practice in person but please ensure you follow social distancing measures and do not attend if you have symptoms of COVID-19, are self-isolating due to a positive COVID-19 test or have been in close contact with someone with COVID-19.
- Your NHS services have a range of measures in place to keep you safe from COVID-19, including regular cleaning of patient areas and social distancing. Please ensure you wear a face covering when attending the practice.
- General practice continues to offer care based on clinical need.
- General practice continues to offer routine screenings, health checks and immunisations.
- The COVID-19 vaccination programme is continuing and will take some time to roll out in full. Please be assured that everyone who needs the vaccine will be offered it. The NHS will be in touch with you when it is your turn to be vaccinated. Please don't call your GP practice before you are invited. In the meantime, you can get information about the COVID-19 Vaccination online at [www.nhs.uk/covidvaccination](http://www.nhs.uk/covidvaccination).
- It is important to register with your local practice. Anyone in England can register with a GP, without needing to show proof of address, ID or immigration status. [Find out more about how to register with a GP](#).
- Please be polite and respectful, your GP and practice team are available and working hard to support you, your family and your friends' health and care needs.
- Consider visiting the local pharmacy for clinical advice on minor health concerns.

## How to seek healthcare advice from a GP

1. Visit your GP surgery website and complete a confidential online form to request advice or treatment. You will receive a response as soon as possible, usually within two working days. Online forms should not be used for very urgent medical problems.
2. Call your surgery to arrange an appointment. You will usually be assessed on the telephone first, with face-to-face care arranged if clinically needed. If you have a preference about how to access care you can discuss it with your practice.
3. You can visit your practice in person but please follow social distancing guidelines. You should not visit your practice in person if isolating due to COVID-19, if you have any symptoms of COVID-19, or are self-isolating due to a positive COVID-19. You

may be asked some questions about your condition to decide which member of the general practice team it would be most appropriate for you to see.

4. For urgent issues or out of hours, you can also go online to seek NHS advice [111.nhs.uk](https://111.nhs.uk) or call the NHS on 111
5. Download the [NHS App](#) to order repeat prescriptions and get health advice.

## Example website and newsletter copy

Your general practice team are here for you. We are continuing to provide services as we have been doing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We are prioritising delivery of care and services based on clinical needs.

If you need medical advice or treatment, please ring us on xxx or, for non-urgent advice or treatment, visit our website and send us your query – our opening hours are xxx. If you need to visit the practice in person, please follow social distancing guidelines and do not attend if you have symptoms of COVID-19 or have recently tested positive for COVID-19.

When you phone or go online, you will be asked to provide some information about your healthcare need. This will help the practice healthcare team assess the most appropriate way to provide your care, which may include a face-to-face consultation and ensure it is provided by the most appropriate person. Face-to-face appointments are available to patients where there is a clinical need.

Consultation requests for non-urgent help can be made online. They will be responded to as soon as possible, usually within two working days.

Alternatively, visit the [local pharmacy](#) for clinical advice on minor health concerns.

For urgent issues or out of hours, you can also call the NHS on 111 or go online to seek NHS advice [111.nhs.uk](https://111.nhs.uk)

Appointments are being offered face-to-face, by telephone, or using video calls and messaging to your mobile or computer – the practice team will assess what is most appropriate for you and if you have a preference you can discuss this with them.

### Attending a face-to-face appointment

If you are asked to come into the surgery for a face-to-face appointment, please remember to wear a face covering. Measures are in place to keep you safe from infection during your visit to the surgery. If you have a disability or condition which means you cannot wear a face covering or cannot communicate with someone who is wearing a face mask, or require other adjustments before your appointment, please let the surgery know ahead of your arrival.

If you develop COVID-19 symptoms or are self-isolating due to COVID-19, you need to inform your practice so your appointment can be rescheduled.

### COVID-19 Vaccination

The NHS is currently vaccinating those people who experts have agreed will benefit from it the most. A vaccination programme of this size and scale will still take some time to complete. Please be assured that everyone who needs the vaccine will be offered it. The NHS will be in touch with you when it is your turn to be vaccinated. Please don't call us before you are invited. In the meantime, you can get information about the COVID-19 Vaccination online at [www.nhs.uk/covidvaccination](http://www.nhs.uk/covidvaccination).

## Answerphone message

Thank you for calling xxx we are here to help you. Our opening hours are xxx. Appointments are being delivered by phone, using video calls and messaging to your mobile or computer, and face-to-face. You will be advised on the best approach for you and can discuss your preference with us. If you need to come into the surgery, please remember to wear a face covering. Measures are in place to keep you safe from infection during your visit to the surgery. You can also call NHS 111.

We cannot answer COVID-19 vaccine enquires or manage vaccination bookings on this number.

The NHS is prioritising vaccinating those people who experts have agreed will benefit from it the most. We will let you know when it is your turn to book your vaccination.

In the meantime, you can get information about the COVID-19 Vaccination online at [www.nhs.uk/covidvaccination](http://www.nhs.uk/covidvaccination).

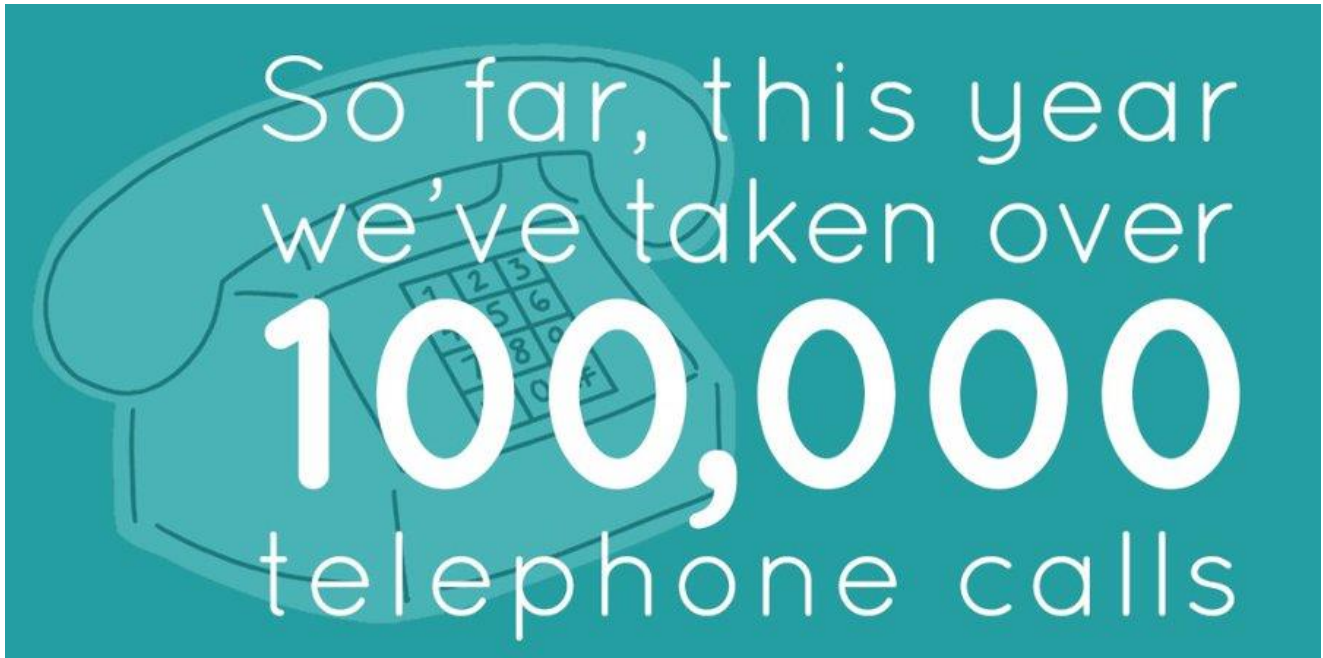
## SMS message

Dear patient, we are here to deal with your health needs. If you need an appointment, please ring us on xxx, or to request non-urgent medical care, visit our website [www.xxxx.nhs.uk](http://www.xxxx.nhs.uk)

Please remember to wear a face covering if you visit the surgery. Measures are in place to keep you safe from infection. You can also go online or call 111 for NHS advice.

## Suggested content

Use performance data to reassure patients about the activity that has happened to-date, e.g.: <https://twitter.com/HaxbyGroup/status/1395069364181905415>



## Video

Produce or reuse vox pop videos encouraging patients to get in touch if they are worried about symptoms. See this example:

<https://twitter.com/NHSEngland/status/1296714927877611520>

## Assets

The following assets have been produced for you to use locally and can be downloaded from [PHE's Campaign Resource Centre](#)

### Poster

Add your details in the white box and use this on your GP practice entrance area. Varying sizes and a black and white version are available on the Campaign Resource Centre website.

**NHS**

**WE ARE HERE FOR YOU  
WITH MEASURES IN PLACE  
TO PROTECT YOU AND OUR  
STAFF FROM CORONAVIRUS.**

**IF YOU NEED HELP FROM THIS GP PRACTICE**

- Contact us online or by phone first
- You will be assessed by a member of the healthcare team and appropriate care will be arranged
- Face-to-face appointments are available wherever there is a clinical need
- If you do need to enter the building, please wear a face covering and follow social distancing
- Download the NHS App to order repeat prescriptions and get health advice. [nhs.uk/nhsapp](https://nhs.uk/nhsapp)

If you need urgent medical help or it's out of hours, call 111 or go online [111.nhs.uk](https://111.nhs.uk)

Your health matters help us help you

### Social media

Use the below updated social media cards and accompanying copy on your social media channels.



**NHS**

**GP PRACTICES  
HAVE MEASURES IN  
PLACE TO MINIMISE  
THE RISK FROM  
CORONAVIRUS.**

Your health matters help us help you

Contact your GP practice online or by phone to be assessed and receive help. A face-to-face appointment will be arranged if appropriate. Do not visit your GP if you have coronavirus symptoms or are self-isolating. Follow the advice at [nhs.uk](https://nhs.uk).

[#HelpUsHelpYou](https://twitter.com/HelpUsHelpYou)



**NHS**

**FACE-TO-FACE  
GP PRACTICE  
APPOINTMENTS  
ARE AVAILABLE  
TO PATIENTS.**

Your  
health  
matters  
help us  
help you

Contact your GP practice online or by phone to be assessed and receive help.

If a face-to-face appointment is clinically necessary, this will be arranged. Measures will be in place to minimise the risk of coronavirus.

[#HelpUsHelpYou](#)

## Animation

### [How to access your GP animation](#)



**NHS**

This animation explains to the public how access to their GP practice has changed to ensure patients get the best possible care safely and quickly.

Access the full suite of materials including the animation video file is available to download on [PHE's Campaign Resource Centre](#) to include:

- Four social media clips
- The above clips with burned in English subtitles
- English subtitles for these videos – these are provided as .srt files which can be added to the video through YouTube or on Twitter
- Subtitles in 12 community languages – also provided as .srt files to be used as appropriate for the local regions
- Supporting copy for social media and bulletins

## Additional resources

- More [general practice resources](#) are available on Public Health England's Campaign Resource Centre
- [Video explaining how to contact your GP remotely](#) (video)



- [Health at Home – how to access NHS services online](#) (video)

## Supporting patients with specific access needs

- [Online consultation](#) software used to enable type-based or interpreter-led communication (in addition to video consultation) with patients and/or their carer
- [Microsoft Teams](#) is also available for use by NHSmail accounts and can be used for 3-way video calls between clinicians, interpreters and patients
- [Communicating with people with hearing loss](#) (web page)
- Access to British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters: [BSL Health Access](#) (web page) delivers immediate, on demand access to British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters for communication with Deaf people
- [Support and guidance for homeless patients](#) (web page)
- [Improving GP registration among social excluded groups](#)
- [Mental health, learning disabilities and autism: Guidance](#)