

General practice communications toolkit

December 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.

Key areas of focus:

- Explaining that there are different access routes that patients can use to request help from their GP practice. They can phone or visit the practice, but they can also go to the practice's website and complete a secure form.
- 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
- The acceleration of the COVID-19 booster programme

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. Online consultation requests, where patients use an online form on their GP practice website to get in touch with their practice, are available in over 95% of practices in England. Meanwhile, video consultations, where a member of the GP practice's medical team makes a video call to a patient, are available in over 99% of practices in England 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.

Patients should be treated consistently regardless of mode of access. For example, 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 not only encourage patients to come forward, but also directs them to the most appropriate support, including NHS 111 for out of hours care.

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 prefer a certain appointment type, 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.
- There are three ways you can choose to get in touch with your practice to get help: using a secure online form on the practice's website, by calling them or by visiting.
- Regardless of how you contact your practice, your practice will help you get the care you need, whether it's a face-to-face appointment, a phone or video call, or by sending a text or online message.
- 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 practice may be participating in the vaccination programme, helping you and your community get vaccinated as quickly as possible, especially in response to the Omicron variant. They are balancing this with continuing to be open and managing your other clinical needs. Please do be reassured that if you need medical attention, your practice is here for you and will determine how to best support you, based on your symptoms.
- 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.
- 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.](#)
- Your GP practice team is here to help you. Thank you for treating us with respect.
- 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 secure 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 you are isolating due to COVID-19 or if you have any symptoms of 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 or call the NHS on 111
5. Download the [NHS App](#) to order repeat prescriptions and get health advice.

Example website and newsletter copy

There are three ways to get in touch with your GP practice

It's no secret that our surgeries have been busier than ever. And as we head into winter, you may require our services more often. That's why we're letting you know that there are several ways to contact your GP practice team, whether it's for you or someone you care for.

There are three ways you can get in touch with us. You can:

- Use an online form on our website at [*Enter URL*]. It's convenient and secure and can save time.
- Call us during surgery hours [*add opening hours – e.g., Monday to Friday, 8am-6pm*] on [*add phone number*]
- Come into the surgery at [*add address*], [*add opening hours e.g., Monday to Friday, 8am-6pm*].

Pick the option that suits you best. No matter how you choose to get in touch with us, whether it's using an online form, calling or visiting, you'll get the help that's right for you.

We may:

- Book a face-to-face appointment for you
- Arrange a phone or video consultation
- Send you a text message, for example, inviting you for a blood test
- Arrange a home visit, or
- Refer you to another service.

However we respond, you can rest assured that we're always looking after your needs.

Parents, carers and young people

If you are a parent or carer, you can use our online form for your children or those you care for. Young people aged between [*x and y*] who want to get in touch directly, can phone us or visit us.

Help us, help you

When requesting care, whether online, by phone or in person, it helps us if you explain what's wrong. This ensures you get the care you need at the right time from the right person – for example, from the doctor or nurse who normally treats you. It also helps our medical team to prioritise those who need our care most.

If you prefer not to say what's wrong – for example, when talking to our reception team – they will always respect your privacy. However, it's an important part of their job to ask, so thank you for your support with this.

Please also tell us if:

- You would prefer us to talk with you by phone, face-to-face or by video call
- You need to speak to a particular person because they have treated you before
- There are certain times of day when you can't talk, for example you are at work, at school or college
- You need English to be interpreted, you need help from another person at your appointment, or if you have other communications needs.

We will do our best to meet your needs in the way you would like, but please bear in mind that if you are unwell, our priority will be to ensure you receive care quickly.

Help from your local pharmacy team

Your local community pharmacist and their team can help and support with minor illnesses. As dedicated, qualified health professionals, and experts in medicines, they can offer clinical advice, consultations and over the counter medicines to help safely manage a wide range of minor health concerns. Many pharmacies also offer a range of new NHS clinical services including blood pressure testing.

For urgent medical help

If you have an urgent medical problem and you're not sure what to do, NHS 111 can help. Call or go online, 111.nhs.uk.
For life-threatening emergencies, dial 999.

Visiting us

When visiting the surgery, please remember you still need to wear a face covering and maintain social distancing to protect vulnerable patients from Coronavirus infection.

If you would like any further information, please visit our website at [*Enter URL*] or speak to our team next time you're in touch.

Assets

Several campaigns have been developed to support general practice. Materials from these campaigns can be downloaded from PHE's Campaign Resource Centre and used locally.

- [Inclusive Access Routes to General Practice](#)
- [Primary Care Staff Respect materials](#)
- [General Practice Access assets](#)
- [General Practice Multidisciplinary Team](#)
- [Accessing NHS Services – Mental Health](#)



Use our convenient, secure online form, call us or visit the practice.

Choose the option that's right for you to tell us what's going on, then we'll get back to you with the help you need.

For more information, visit the surgery's website.

Please follow Coronavirus infection prevention measures when visiting the practice.

Your health matters Help us help you

How to access you GP

Graphic



This [graphic](#) explains patient access routes into general practice, how the request is managed (triaged) and the possible ways a practice might respond.

Animation



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

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)
- [Support and guidance for homeless patients](#) (web page)
- [Mental health, learning disabilities and autism: Guidance](#)