

How to get the most out of your General Practice

Patient Booklet





This booklet is for people aged 65+ who have two or more long-term health conditions. It is designed to help you get the most out of your contacts with your General Practice, whether you are speaking to them via telephone or video-call, or in-person.

We spoke to people about their experiences of communicating with receptionists, doctors, nurses and other staff from their general practices. We listened to what they found challenging and what they found helpful. We then worked with a group of patients, carers, staff and other experts to create this booklet.

This booklet contains a range of information and suggestions about what, how and when to communicate with staff from your General Practice. It is divided into three sections:

1

Information
about staff
and services

2

Skills to
prepare and
explain

3

Confidence
to speak up
and ask

You have received this booklet because your General Practice supports the information and suggestions within. You may find some parts of this booklet more useful than others. What you find useful may change over time and depend on who you are speaking to.

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To find out who and what is available at your General Practice, ask a receptionist or visit your practice’s website.

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Think through what you want to discuss and say.
Think about what is most important. Mention this first.

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It’s always okay to ask. When asking, include your observations, feelings and needs, then make a request.

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Staff names and faces

Knowing the name of the person you are talking to, or are going to talk to, and what they look like, can help you feel more at ease.

Information about the staff at your General Practice may be available on a board in the reception area or on your practice's website.

If you are not sure which member of staff an appointment will be with, it's okay to ask.



Name:

Role:

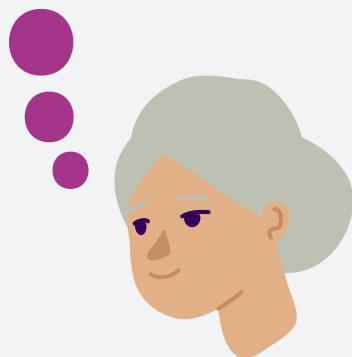
Example

Can you tell me who the appointment will be with?



Name:

Role:



Staff roles and available services

Every General Practice is different. There is a growing, and potentially confusing range of staff working in this setting. It can be hard to know what everyone does or can do, and what services are on offer.

The doctors and nurses who work in general practices trained to be generalists so they know a lot about a wide range of things. Some generalists also have particular areas of expertise or special interests. These can include topics such as mental health or reproductive health, or specific conditions such as diabetes or heart disease.

To find out more about who and what is available at your practice, ask a receptionist or visit your practice's website.

Receptionist view:

"The role of a receptionist is to be the first point of call for a patient. We are trained to ask specific questions to enable us to best direct a patient to ensure they get the most appropriate level of care required."



Mental health

Your mental health, including your mood and emotional wellbeing, is as important as your physical health.



You can talk to any of the doctors or nurses at your General Practice about mental health. They have all had training in this area and want to hear from you if things are not quite right. For example, if you feel low or stressed, have distressing or intrusive thoughts, or have difficulty concentrating or sleeping.

Practice nurse view:

"The mental health and wellbeing of patients is very important to me. I want to help and support all my patients in any way I can. I would start by listening to you then together we can help you find the support that suits your needs."



Your practice may refer you to a mental health service for support. This can take time but your practice can help you while you wait. They can also suggest other organisations who may be able to provide more immediate support.

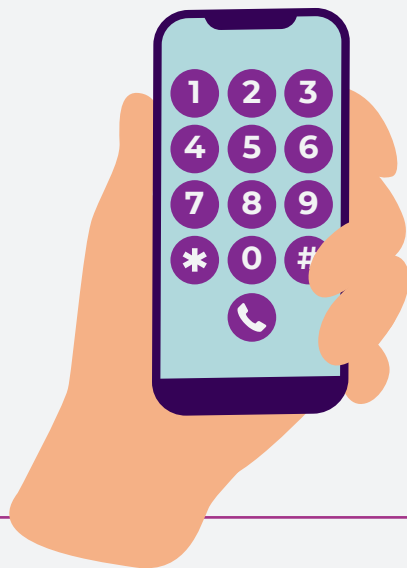
Experience:

Years after Mariam's daughter died, she suddenly felt depressed. She spoke to her GP who suggested a local support service that really helped:

"I did go to the doctor about this feeling, and she understood what I was on about. Did I want to go on tablets? Or did I want to speak to somebody that would listen to me, that you could talk to. I chose the latter, and it was very, very helpful, truly helpful. That was good advice from my practice."

If you are in crisis and your practice is closed, you can call NHS 111 or the Samaritans, which are both available 24 hours a day.

Crisis contact numbers:
NHS 111
Samaritans 116 123



Being prepared and prioritising

Preparing for a contact with your General Practice can help you:

- Make the most of your time
- Explain things clearly so others can understand
- Be less likely to forget something
- Have your concerns addressed and needs met

You can prepare for a contact by taking a few minutes to think through what you want to discuss and say.

Some people find it helpful to write things down. For example, making a list of the conditions, symptoms, suspected side-effects, medications or other treatments, and tests or test results they want to discuss.

As you may only have enough time to discuss one or two things in a single appointment, it can also help to think about what is most important or what you are most concerned about. Put these things at the top of your list and mention them first.

Example list

Things to mention

1. Breathing worse
2. Swollen ankles – why?
3. Sore throat – inhaler?
4. Need more co-codamol
5. Referral for physio?

Taking a few minutes to think through what you want to discuss and say can be helpful for any contact, not just appointments.

If you do write a list, having this with you and referring to it during the contact can help you remember all the things you want to mention. You may want to keep the list by your phone, or in your diary, wallet or purse so you have this with you when you need it.

Some people share their list with the person they are speaking to. This can help you and your care providers ensure nothing important is missed. It may be especially useful when there are a few things you want to mention and you are unsure:

- What might be important
- If different things could be related

GP view:

"I like it when my patients bring in a list. It means we are less likely to miss anything. It also helps us work together to decide what things we need to look at first."



What staff know and want to know

Care providers cannot read or remember everything in a person's medical records. Before an appointment, they will look at your summary record but this may not include all the information that could be relevant.

If your care provider knows the reason for your appointment in advance, they may also be able to read some parts of your full medical record. For example, they might look at the details of past appointments or test results for the condition or symptom you want to speak to them about.

No matter who you are speaking to at your General Practice, they will want to know the reason for that contact. Receptionists are there to help. They can provide you with options based on what you tell them and pass important information on to your care providers.



GP view:

"Your GP may be juggling several urgent queries when you request your appointment.

Reception will let your GP know why you need your appointment and this will help them prioritise. It may be that you need to be seen more urgently than you realise."



Your practice also needs to know if you have any communication requirements or if you struggle to visit the practice because of a condition, disability or impairment. If you have any difficulties, contact reception to check they are aware.

You can find out what information is included in your full medical record and summary record by requesting a copy, free of charge, from your practice. You may also be able to access some parts of your medical record online.

To find out how to do this, ask a receptionist or visit your practice's website.

Explaining what is wrong and what you need

You can get the most out of each contact you have by being clear about what you want to communicate and why.

Most of the contacts we have with staff at our general practices are short so it helps to be direct and where relevant, give a brief explanation of:

Observations - what is wrong / what you have noticed

Feelings - what you are concerned about / how you feel about what you have noticed

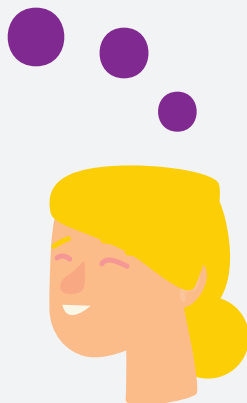
Needs - what outcome you want / what you may need

Requests - what you expect to happen / what the person you are speaking to might be able to do



Example – speaking to receptionist

I've noticed blood after going to the toilet and I'm worried because I've got a family history of cancer. I want to see someone as soon as possible. Could you get a GP to phone me?



During a consultation, it can help to provide information such as how long you have been experiencing something for and what impact it is having on your life. Staff also find it helpful to know what support you have at home and beyond.



Example – speaking to GP

My breathing has been worse than usual. I have COPD but I'm normally fine when taking the dog for a walk around the park. However, for the past couple of weeks, I've been having to stop and catch my breath. At first, I thought it might be because the weather was so warm but I'm a bit worried now because it's cooler and my breathing hasn't got any better.

Speaking up when concerned

You live with the conditions you have every day. This makes you an expert by experience. Your knowledge about your health and wellbeing is valuable. If you have concerns or think something is not quite right about your health or healthcare, it is important to let your General Practice know. The staff are there to help.

Whatever the situation, it is better to speak up than ignore a concern. You may be:

- Worried about a new symptom or one that is getting worse
- Unsure if a medication is right for you
- Finding some advice difficult to follow

You may not always feel reassured or find what works best for you the first time you raise a concern. If you are still worried or not happy about something, it is important to tell someone. If the staff at your practice are aware of your concerns they can:

- Find the best person for you to speak to
- Investigate a symptom and find out what can be done
- Provide reassurance
- Suggest alternatives to find a treatment that works for you

It's better to speak up



If you are finding it difficult to speak up, or feel embarrassed saying something, you may want to think about who you would feel most comfortable speaking to and whether or not it would help to have someone with you for support or to speak on your behalf.

Experience: Gogs decided to speak to a GP about how she was feeling:

"I feel depressed but not every day. My down days are very low. I thought about who I best related to, who would listen, care and support me in a genuine way. I'd had these feelings for a while so wasn't expecting immediate action but the person I chose was as good as his word."

Staff are there to listen and want to help. Help them help you by explaining what you have noticed and how you feel. The things people hold back from their care providers are sometimes key to finding out what is wrong and how best to help.



Section 3: Confidence to speak up and ask

If there is a topic you are struggling to bring up, you may find it helpful to say so. For example: There is something I would like to mention but feel embarrassed talking about.

Others find that the easiest way to begin a conversation is to start with one or two words, introducing the topic. For example: Could we talk about waterworks?



Experience: James had previously had a problem with his bladder that required an operation. He thought the problem may be coming back so spoke to a GP:

“Well, I just told the GP I’m peeing in instalments. He said, we’ve got some new approaches now, so gave me a good long talk on bladder control and non-invasive treatment. He gave me some exercises to do that I’ve been doing fairly regularly. These pelvic floor exercises do help you control urgency.”

Asking when uncertain

At times, you may feel unsure about something relating to your health or healthcare. You may have concerns about a particular symptom, medication or treatment, or whether or not something has been done. You may have doubts about a diagnosis, or have different information from different sources and not know what is correct or what to do.

The staff at your General Practice can help you resolve these uncertainties and make decisions.

It's always okay to ask for what you need. This could be understanding, empathy, reassurance, confirmation, further explanation or to be heard.

If you feel unsure of something during a conversation, you could ask for clarity there and then. For example, by saying: Can you say more about that, I'm not sure I understand?

At the end of a conversation, it may be useful to ask for information on what you should expect and when, and what to do if this does not happen or you do not hear anything.

*It's always
okay to ask*



Section 3: Confidence to speak up and ask

When asking, providing details alongside questions helps the person you are speaking to understand what has happened, what you need and why. You may want to think about and include the following:

Observations – what happened / what you have seen, heard or remember

Feelings – how you feel now / your emotions in relation to what happened

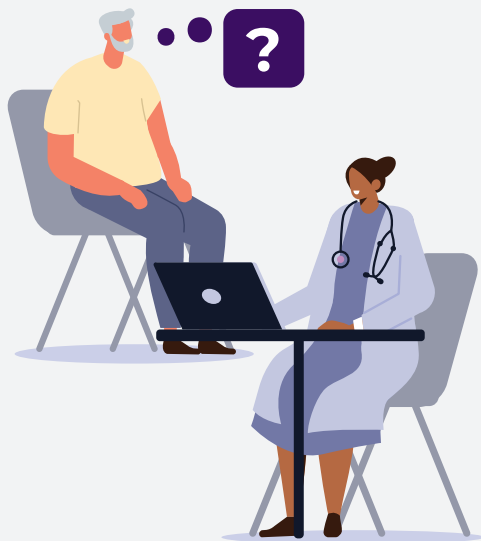
Needs – what you want from the conversation because of how you feel

Requests – what you would like the person you are speaking to to do

That may seem like a lot of information, and you will not always need to include everything, but it is possible to do so quite quickly, especially if you think about it and plan in advance.

Example – speaking to GP

At my last appointment you listened to my heart and said I had a murmur. I'm confused as I'm not really sure what that means and I'm worried because I know my heart isn't in great shape. I would value some clarity and reassurance. Could you explain what a murmur is and what it means for me?



About this Booklet

Thank you for reading. We hope you find something in this booklet to help you get the most out of your General Practice.

This booklet is available in print and online. For additional copies, please contact the authors. Unfortunately, this booklet is not currently available in other formats or languages.

This booklet was created by a team from the School of Health Sciences at The University of Manchester, in partnership with patients, carers, staff and other experts. The GP views were provided by Dr Brian McMillan, the practice nurse view by Caroline Hince, and the receptionist view by Kimberly Craven.

Some aspects of this booklet are based on the work of Marshall B. Rosenberg and the Center for Nonviolent Communication.



For further information about this booklet and how it was created, please visit the SPEECH website or contact the team:

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