



Royal College of
General Practitioners

Getting the most from your health service

INFORMATION LEAFLET
developed by patients,
for patients



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It's our health service... so how can we protect it?

Health services in Northern Ireland are under a huge amount of pressure. As patients, we can struggle to get a timely appointment with our family doctor (GP) and many of us are on long waiting lists for various hospital treatments and procedures.

In the community, our GP is the main medical professional available to us on a regular basis. Over the past 10 years, GP workload has increased a lot and there aren't enough GPs in Northern Ireland to meet the current demand on their time and services.

Our services are struggling to meet demand and we can all play a part to ensure we have access when we most need it.



How can we get the best from our health services?

Can I look after myself?

There are lots of conditions that we can manage ourselves. Sometimes we feel under-the-weather and it can be tricky to know if we need to see the doctor or not. For many minor ailments, we can treat symptoms at home with appropriate over-the-counter medicines and rest. By looking after ourselves when we can, valuable GP appointments can be available for those who really need them. But remember – if your symptoms persist, you may need to visit your GP.

An easy way to remember this advice... Think

3 before GP

Can I self-care?

Can I get advice from trusted online services?

Can I seek advice and assistance from my local community pharmacist?

Where can I find helpful medical information?

There are a lot of mixed healthcare messages on the internet - but there is also a lot of good, trusted advice.

When looking online for advice, always use reputable, trusted websites such as [nidirect](#). Still worried? Speak to your doctor – they are very well trained and are there to help us.

In Northern Ireland, nidirect provides a great source of government information for health and social care services and conditions. By visiting [nidirect](#) and searching '[how to use your health services](#)', we

have access to a wide-range of health advice, including emergency healthcare, first aid, minor injuries and self-care.

Nidirect also provides a useful '[A-Z Symptoms Checker](#)'. Patients can use the search function to find information on signs and symptoms, causes, prevention tips, how we can look after ourselves at home, when to see our GP and other useful advice.

REMEMBER

The quality of information on the internet varies - only use reputable websites such as [nidirect](#) for your medical advice.

What sort of advice is available?

Below is an example of the type of information we can access online. In the case of coughs and colds, we sometimes aren't sure if, or when, we need to see a doctor or pharmacist - but [nidirect](#) provides the following advice that we can try.



Symptoms of the Common Cold

The symptoms of a cold usually develop within a day or two of becoming infected.

The main symptoms include:

a sore throat, a blocked or runny nose, sneezing, a cough, a hoarse voice and generally feeling unwell.

Who can I go to for advice in the community?

There are many healthcare professionals we can seek advice from.

[Community Pharmacists](#) are highly skilled healthcare professionals, with a wealth of knowledge about many illnesses, infections, treatments and medications. Many pharmacists offer free consultations for customers who call in, offering valuable advice and guidance on managing a multitude of ailments.

REMEMBER

When we visit the pharmacist, we often have to pay for over-the-counter medication that they might recommend - but there are also minor ailment schemes that may support certain medications for specific conditions. We can often get a faster service, compared to visiting our GP practice. Pharmacies are well placed in the community and are an 'open door' to the health service.

You can visit [nidirect](#) for more information - just search for '[community pharmacists](#)'

What to do

There's no cure for a cold, but you can look after yourself at home by:

- resting, drinking plenty of fluids and eating healthily
- taking over-the-counter painkillers, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, to reduce any fever or discomfort
- using decongestant sprays or tablets to relieve a blocked nose
- trying remedies such as gargling salt water and sucking on menthol sweets

Making the most of appointments with healthcare professionals

We will all need to see different healthcare professionals for different reasons throughout the course of our lives, so how can we get the best from **all** of our interactions with the health service?

Who should I speak to?

In our GP practices, there are often many different team members. These might include different doctors, pharmacists, nurses and others – and in the future will likely include physiotherapists, social workers and mental health specialists. With all of this expertise available to us, we should try to make the most of the team we have available.

When we phone our GP surgery for an appointment, the medical receptionist will often ask a few questions. They are not being curious or trying to treat us – they are following directions given to them by the GPs working in the practice and trying to make sure that everyone gets prompt access to the most appropriate healthcare professional and service.

REMEMBER

Reception staff are trained by the GP practice to help us!



What if I am embarrassed about what I need to say?

Doctors and healthcare professionals have seen and heard it all, so please try not to be embarrassed.

When we are nervous or worried about how to describe a condition or body part, just use the language that feels the most comfortable to you. Doctors and healthcare professionals are not there to judge us – they simply want to help. So, tell them about your concerns in whatever words suit you best so that they have all the information to help them do their jobs as best they can.

REMEMBER

We know our own bodies and we know what 'normal' means to us - so if we feel different or think that something in our body or mind has changed, we shouldn't ignore it – always talk to someone.

I can't attend my appointment. What should I do?

Every day, patients need to cancel appointments and there are many good reasons why we can't attend. To give other patients the best chance of booking an appointment that becomes available, we should cancel our appointments with as much notice as possible.

REMEMBER

Appointments are valuable! Help make sure they are all used by cancelling unwanted appointments with as much notice as possible.

How can I prepare for an appointment with a medical professional?

When we see our GP or healthcare professional, we usually only have a limited amount of time – so be prepared!

- When unwell with continuing symptoms, it is useful to keep a record of any changes. Then, if you need to see the pharmacist, GP or other health professional, it can be useful to have a record of symptoms.
- You should think about what you want to talk about. Try to give examples and a short history of symptoms, family history or events that relate to what you want to talk about.
- Write down any medications you are using, questions or queries so you don't forget!
- If you are more comfortable having someone with you, consider inviting a friend or family member to appointments to support you.
- There is no such thing as a stupid question – **when you still aren't sure, just ask!**



What if I am still worried?

- If your GP has organised tests which do not identify a diagnosis and symptoms return, go back to see your doctor.

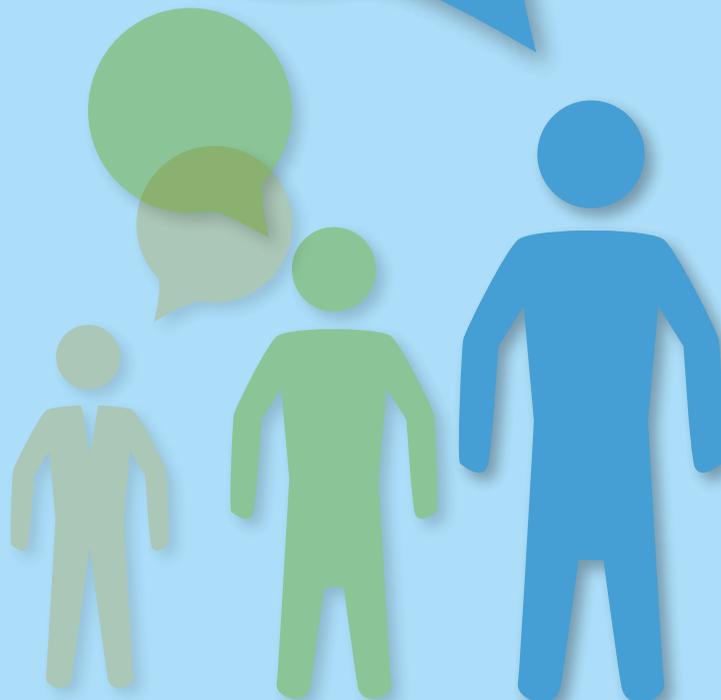
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This information leaflet was created by the Royal College of General Practitioners Northern Ireland Patient Group