

Solving the 24-hour healthcare puzzle

Our invaluable guide to round-the-clock medical care explains where to get help, day or night, if you or your family fall ill

You need medical attention, your GP surgery is closed but it's not serious enough to call an ambulance. What do you do? Fifteen years ago you would have had only two options – call your GP out or go to your local hospital accident and emergency (A&E) department. But now, new services such as NHS Direct/NHS24, minor injuries units and walk-in centres mean you've got more choice, day or night.

These services were introduced to reduce pressure on A&E departments by providing alternatives for those with less serious conditions, in the hope that this would cut waiting times in A&E. The need for alternatives increased after most GP practices 'opted out' of 24-hour care in 2004.

But our research shows that awareness of the new alternatives to GPs and A&E treatment is worryingly low. Eight out of

ten people we spoke to didn't know about minor injuries units, two thirds were unaware of walk-in centres and nearly half didn't know about NHS Direct or NHS24, the Scottish equivalent.

The Department of Health claims the new services have been a success. A spokesman told us: 'We do not accept there are low levels of awareness. Take-up is good and usage continues to increase.' But the government's own figures show visits to A&E are actually increasing. Last year, a House of Commons report concluded that the new services were 'addressing unmet demand, rather than taking the pressure off A&E.'

Making the right choices

The new services could save you time and discomfort the next time you are unwell, so it is well worth finding out what is available – we explain the options over the next four pages. Be aware, though, that not everyone in the UK has the full range of options on their doorstep, as local health organisations manage their own budgets and decide what out-of-hours care to offer patients. The checklist on p15 explains how to find out about the services which are available in your area.



MINOR INJURIES UNITS

- ✓ UK-wide
- ✓ Treatment by nurses and doctors
- ✓ For sprains, strains, minor breaks/illnesses
- ✓ Typically 12 hours a day, seven days a week



GP OUT-OF-HOURS

- ✓ UK-wide
- ✓ Treatment by doctors, nurses and paramedics
- ✓ For urgent medical problems
- ✓ Typically 6.30pm-8am, Mon-Fri
- ✓ 24hr, weekends, bank holidays

OUR RESEARCH

In September 2005 we surveyed 2183 adults in Britain about out-of-hours care. We also met groups of patients earlier this year to get their views and experiences.



PHARMACIES

- ✓ UK-wide
- ✓ Staffed by pharmacists
- ✓ For medicines and advice on minor ailments
- ✓ High-street shop/supermarket opening hours

Information gap is cause for concern

Patients left in the dark

This report is the first part of an ongoing *Which?* investigation into the way out-of-hours care is working in the NHS.

The government's White Paper, published in January, promised to create more patient-focused services in England. If it is to succeed, we believe that it is essential that patients are involved in discussions to ensure that communities get the services they really need.

Our research for this report shows that, to date, local information about out-of-hours services has been inadequate.

We'd like to see patients being given clearer information about the services available in their area and the government seems to agree. A Department of Health spokesman told us: 'The department will be doing more in 2006 to address people's needs for information about services and how to access them.' We will be sending our complete findings to the government soon and will update you in future issues.



NHS Direct

NHS 24

NHS DIRECT/NHS24

- ✓ England, Wales, Scotland
- ✓ Staffed by advisers/nurses
- ✓ For medical advice/ local health care information
- ✓ 24hr, seven days a week



WALK-IN CENTRES

- ✓ England/Northern Ireland only
- ✓ Treatment by nurses (some centres have doctors)
- ✓ For routine healthcare when you can't get to a GP
- ✓ Typically open early am to late pm, seven days a week

There are 73 walk-in centres in operation across England

Your essential reference guide to round-the-clock health

Pharmacies →

A convenient way to get information and advice about medicines, because pharmacies are everywhere and you don't need an appointment. From spring 2006 some pharmacists will be able to prescribe licensed medicines, except for controlled drugs such as morphine. However, this service is likely to be offered only on a limited basis at first.

WHO WILL I SEE?

A pharmacist.

WHAT FOR?

- Advice on how to treat minor ailments: bugs and viruses, sports injuries, tummy troubles, women's health problems, skin conditions, allergies, aches and pains, children's problems
- Information about medicines you are taking
- Emergency contraception
- Emergency repeat prescriptions
- Advice on visiting your GP or seeking other specialist treatment

WHERE?

You can find pharmacies on most UK high streets, as well as in some hospitals and large supermarkets.

WHEN?

Most high-street pharmacies follow normal shop opening hours, although some might open for late evenings and bank holidays. Information about late opening may be in your local paper or posted on the pharmacy door.

Supermarket pharmacies are usually open longer hours. For example, most Tesco pharmacies are open from 9am to 8pm Monday to Saturday and from 10am to 4pm on Sunday.

Check local stores for their exact opening times.



NHS Direct / NHS24 (Scotland) →

Both of these schemes offer medical advice and information via a telephone helpline and a website – a useful first step if you're unsure of where to go or what to do.



WHO WILL I TALK TO?

Your call will be assessed by an adviser, who'll pass you on to a trained nurse if you need specialist medical advice.

WHAT FOR?

- Information about health services in your area, eg location and opening hours of your nearest walk-in centre, minor injuries unit or GP surgery.

NHS Direct is a useful first step if you are unsure of where to go or what to do

- Specific advice on what to do if you or a member of your family is feeling unwell. They may suggest different ways to treat yourself, advise you to go to your local GP or A&E or to call your nearest out-of-hours service.

WHERE?

NHS Direct is available in England and Wales. NHS24 is the Scottish equivalent. Northern Ireland doesn't have this service. NHS Direct advice is available on satellite digital TV via the remote control interactive buttons. An NHS Direct self-help guide has been distributed to homes in England inside the *Thomson Local Directory*.

WHEN?

Round-the-clock, seven days a week.

Walk-in centres →

Walk-in centres offer routine, primary healthcare services. You can use them in the same way as you would your own local GP's surgery, but without having to register with them in advance or make a specific appointment.

WHO WILL I SEE?

An NHS nurse will assess your condition on arrival and provide treatment if appropriate. Some walk-in centres also have doctors available for consultation where necessary.

WHAT FOR?

- Blood pressure checks
- Contraceptive advice and emergency contraception prescriptions
- Coughs, colds and flu-like symptoms
- Dressing care
- Hayfever, bites and stings
- Minor cuts and wounds
- Muscle and joint injuries

- Skin conditions
- Support on stopping smoking
- Tummy troubles
- Women's health problems

WHERE?

There are 73 walk-in centres in operation across England.

Northern Ireland currently has only one equivalent facility, called a 'health and care centre', but a further 41 are planned to open over the next ten years.

There are no NHS walk-in centres in either Scotland or Wales at present.

WHEN?

Typically, walk-in centres are open from early in the morning until late in the evening and operate seven days a week. However, local opening times do vary – you can find your nearest centre and check when it is open by calling NHS Direct.



GP out-of-hours

Following the new GP contract in 2004, most GP practices 'opted out' of providing 24-hour care. This out-of-hours responsibility passed to local primary care organisations, which decided what services to provide in their area.

Some introduced out-of-hours or primary care centres staffed by local nurses, doctors and paramedics. Others hired private firms.

If your problem isn't urgent, you can make an appointment to see your GP in surgery hours. If you need urgent

care options from the NHS

A&E and 999 / 112 →

You can take yourself to A&E or dial 999 or 112 – the single emergency number for the European Union – for an ambulance. One will be sent, though, only if the call handler thinks it's necessary. In some cases, a paramedic or emergency care practitioner (ECP) may be sent instead. You won't be seen any more quickly because you arrive by ambulance – all arrivals at A&E are prioritised by the seriousness of their condition. Waiting times can be long but in England 99 per cent of patients now spend four hours or less from arrival to admission, discharge or transfer.

WHO WILL I SEE?

A doctor, ECP, nurse or paramedic.

WHAT FOR?

You should go to A&E only if you have

a serious injury or illness. You should call 999 or 112 only in a critical or life-threatening situation. Examples of such situations include:

- loss of consciousness
- heavy blood loss
- suspected broken bones
- persistent chest pain for 15 minutes or more
- difficulty breathing
- overdose, ingestion or poisoning.

WHERE?

A&E departments can be found in major NHS hospitals across the UK. You can telephone either 999 or 112 free of charge from any UK telephone, including mobiles.

WHEN?

A&E departments and 999/112 services are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.



services →

help when the surgery is closed, call the out-of-hours number. You may be asked to attend a local out-of-hours centre or, if necessary, a GP, paramedic or emergency care practitioner (ECP) may be sent to your home.

WHO WILL I SEE?

A doctor, nurse, ECP or paramedic.

WHAT FOR?

Urgent medical problems that can't wait until your GP surgery is open.

WHERE?

All local communities have out-of-hours care. All GP surgeries should have an answering machine message referring you to an out-of-hours service or NHS Direct/NHS24. Alternatively, ask for details when you next visit your GP.

WHEN?

Usually 6.30pm to 8am weekdays and all weekends/bank holidays.

OPENING TIMES	
MON	6.30pm - 8.00pm
TUES	6.30pm - 8.00pm
WED	6.30pm - 8.00pm
THURS	6.30pm - 8.00pm
FRI	6.30pm - 8.00pm
SAT	24 hrs
SUN	24 hrs

Minor injuries units →

These units offer diagnosis and treatment for people with minor illnesses and injuries. If there's one near you, it is a good alternative to A&E – waiting times should be shorter and you won't need an appointment.

WHO WILL I SEE?

A qualified nurse or doctor.

WHAT FOR?

- Cuts and grazes
- Sprains and strains
- Small broken bones such as in fingers and toes
- Bites and stings
- Infected wounds
- Minor head injuries
- Minor eye infections

WHERE?

There are minor injuries units across the UK, with more than 150 in England alone.

WHEN?

Twelve hours a day, seven days a week. Opening times do vary, so check local details via NHS Direct/NHS24.



Many minor injuries units are open 12 hours a day, every day

Checklist

Steps you can take to prepare yourself in case you need to get out-of-hours medical care

Action points

- Be prepared. Find out about the NHS/medical services that are available in your area before you need them. Make a note of any useful addresses or phone numbers so that you have easy access to them in a crisis.
- Keep a well-stocked first-aid kit at home. Check the expiry dates on medicines and read the instructions carefully. If you are concerned about your symptoms, consult a health professional.
- Consider doing a first-aid course, particularly if you look after children or elderly relatives. You can get information about courses from St John Ambulance or the Red Cross.
- Always think carefully before dialling 999/112 or going to accident & emergency. Are you seriously ill or injured, or could you be treated elsewhere?

Your local NHS services

Get information about NHS services in your area and advice about treatment by contacting:

■ NHS Direct (England)

24-hour helpline: 0845 4647
www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

■ NHS Direct (Wales)

24-hour helpline: 0845 4647
www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

■ NHS24 (Scotland)

24-hour helpline: 0845 424 2424
www.nhs24.com

■ Northern Ireland

www.healthandcareni.co.uk

Get in touch

We'd like to hear about your good and bad experiences of using these NHS services.

Please email your stories to letters@which.co.uk or write to us at Which?, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH.