

Out-of-hours healthcare

Consumers don't know where to go for medical advice outside office hours – and some of you are unhappy with the services available

Your doctor's surgery will be shut for four days this Christmas, which may leave you wondering where to go for medical help.

Would you know when to use an urgent care centre or a walk-in service, for example?

Our research shows that consumers are often unaware of the out-of-hours health services on offer and may be unclear about which to choose (see p48 for our cut-out-and-keep guide). Only 48% of the people we interviewed, for example, knew they could call an out-of-hours GP service.

We also found that people's experiences and access to services depended on where they lived.

Are you being served?

When we asked 2,098 members of the UK public whether they had used an out-of-hours health service in the past

year, 35% had. Although 52% of those surveyed were very satisfied with the overall service they received, there were some problems. For example, we found that people were often referred on from the initial service they contacted or visited (see 'Pass the parcel', below).

Although referrals can be the right thing in some circumstances, we were particularly surprised that around 72% of those calling NHS Direct in England and Wales were referred on – NHS Direct's own publicity says that it's 'helping take the pressure off GP surgeries and A&E as it increasingly continues to advise callers to treat themselves at home'.

Unmet expectations

Our work also highlighted the need for better information and communication between patients and those working for out-of-hours services, so that public and professional perceptions are closer.



IN BRIEF

In this report we help you to:

- understand the healthcare options available to you in the UK
- choose the appropriate out-of-hours service
- always have the right contact details on hand.

Those we interviewed commented on differences of opinion between patients and out-of-hours service providers over the services offered, the time it would take to access them and whether patients should travel to services themselves.

One Which? member told us that, when pregnant and bleeding, she was shocked to be told by her GP out-of-hours service that she might wait up to six hours for a GP home visit – this would have met the English NHS target for 'less urgent' face-to-face consultations.

She was told that she could drive to the nearest out-of-hours centre, but it was 10 miles away and she felt unable to do this. In desperation, she contacted her midwife who told her that she mustn't drive and arranged for her to be admitted to hospital. She had a miscarriage.

Difficulties and dissatisfaction

People also said they had difficulties with calls. 18% of those surveyed said they found it hard to explain problems over the phone, and 22% thought the service didn't understand the seriousness of their situation (see 'A telephone headache', p46).

Waiting times were the major cause of dissatisfaction in our survey, with 16% very or fairly dissatisfied with their most recent experience of A&E and 8% with NHS Direct/NHS 24.

A number of people told us that they choose services according to which they

PASS THE PARCEL

When we asked people about the last time they'd used an out-of-hours service (during the previous 12 months), 43% said they were referred to another service – and 72% of those who called NHS Direct were referred on

Service <small>Sample size in brackets</small>	Referred on to other service
A&E (196)	19%
NHS Direct (112)	72%
NHS 24 (33)	85% ^a
GP service (89)	47%
999 (77)	49%
Pharmacy (71)	28%
NHS walk-in centre (71)	67%
Minor injuries unit (20)	39%
All services	43%

^a NHS 24 is the single access point for other services in Scotland



Your out-of-hours healthcare options

There's no 'one size fits all' with out-of-hours care, so use our three-part guide to find the right service for you

1 National helplines

NHS Direct and NHS 24

NHS Direct in England and Wales, and NHS 24 in Scotland, provide confidential telephone advice 24 hours a day, every day of the year. You can call them if you're unsure what treatment or service is needed, as well as for general health information and advice. Their websites contain useful health information.

Call handlers ask simple questions before directing you for further phone assessment with a nurse – or sometimes another health professional. This will usually involve a call back.

In Scotland, NHS 24 is the only contact for local out-of-hours health services, except for the emergency 999 number.

■ **NHS Direct (England/Wales):** 0845 46 47

■ **NHS Direct online and on TV:** England: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk; Sky Digital via 'interactive' button or Freeview channel 100
Wales: www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

■ **NHS 24 (Scotland):** 08454 242424 or www.nhs24.com

Our findings

More than one in 10 members of the public had called NHS Direct in the past year.

People gave us examples of it being reassuring, easy to use, professional, friendly, convenient and referring on to the right person or service for advice. One user said: 'It was having someone to talk to about my problem rather than sit and worry.' Several praised the service for phoning back to check they were OK.

However, criticisms included 'waffly' or 'impractical' advice, with a few people questioning the skill of the person they spoke to and feeling they were over-cautious. One said: 'My treatment – no treatment. I might as well have been on the phone to a normal person.'

People used NHS Direct because they thought it would give them advice more quickly, but a number of people were unhappy with having to wait for advice, and 3% said that it hadn't called them back at all.

think will deal with them the quickest, while others try more than one to get the speediest result.

And some experienced problems with more than one service, including Which? member David Heard, who called his out-of-hours GP service when a guest had an allergic reaction that caused her leg to swell.

He says: 'Rather than turn up to casualty, we thought we'd get some advice. But, on hearing that she didn't live in the area, they refused to speak to us and said she had to go back to her own area – many hours away.'

'After driving to the nearby hospital and being told there would be a four to six-hour wait, we gave up and went private.'



Convenient choices

Where you live can make a considerable difference to which out-of-hours services you choose; choices often depend on convenience. For this report, we spoke to out-of-hours service users in the four primary care trust areas of Newcastle, rural Suffolk and Cornwall, and Greenwich, London.

In Greenwich, only around one in 10 people had called NHS Direct in the past year, compared with nearly half in the other areas. But these people were the largest users of pharmacies and A&E units – perhaps reflecting their availability in the inner city.

People in rural Cornwall, meanwhile, were the most likely to have called 999 or requested a GP home visit, and 17% of them were dissatisfied with access to medicines they'd been prescribed out of hours.

This was echoed by Which? member Neil Turner, 53, from East Yorkshire. He told us that he could not fill the prescription the out-of-hours GP gave him at night because he could not find a pharmacy. The GP was 30 miles away and did not know the area. Neil said: 'The GP was very apologetic, but it was the system that was failing.'

A TELEPHONE HEADACHE



Vera Stammen *Which?* policy adviser

Vera phoned NHS Direct after developing a terrible headache that was getting worse, especially when she sat up. They checked for the symptoms of meningitis and told Vera that it was probably a migraine.

The next morning, Vera's headache was unbearable and she was being sick. She phoned NHS Direct again, but they couldn't find her record from the night before. Vera said: 'The person told me that I shouldn't bother

my GP and that she was sure it was nothing serious, but I knew it was.'

Vera went to her GP, who fast-tracked her into hospital. A neurologist found she had a rare condition that required a medical procedure. She said: 'NHS Direct couldn't have been expected to diagnose such an unusual condition, but my odd symptoms should have rung alarm bells, and my notes shouldn't have disappeared.'

2 Community-based services

Out-of-hours GP services

You should call a GP out-of-hours service when you need advice quickly, but the condition is not life threatening. The answerphone should tell you what to do when the surgery is closed, and some connect you to out-of-hours services.

You may receive telephone advice from a GP or nurse, or a GP home visit. You may be asked to visit a GP, for example at an out-of-hours or primary care centre (this may be hospital based and offer a GP service).

Our findings

Whereas one in 10 of those calling a GP number for advice were dissatisfied with their experience, no one who received a home visit was dissatisfied. Fewer people were very satisfied with the GP out-of-hours service than with any other service.

Walk-in services

Walk-in services – sometimes called urgent care centres – treat minor illnesses and injuries, such as sprains. They include minor injuries units and can be based alongside pharmacies and hospitals. They're often led by nurses.

Walk-in services usually open from early morning to late evening, seven days a week, but check locally. You don't have to make an appointment, but it's worth phoning ahead to check that you or a family member will be treated – particularly in the case of young children.

Our findings

People told us that they choose these services for convenience, expecting shorter waiting times and easier parking than at hospitals. However, some have experienced long waits.

Pharmacies

Pharmacies may be open until 12am and offer an increasing range of services. Services can include advice about minor ailments and certain medicines.

Our findings

One in 10 respondents who'd used an out-of-hours service said they'd been to a pharmacy the last time they needed health advice or treatment out of hours. Of all the services used, people were most satisfied with pharmacies – the biggest reason for praise was staff knowledge and skills (see our pharmacies report, October 2008, p12).



Which? online Staying in hospital

Spending time in hospital can be daunting but, by asking the right questions beforehand, your stay should go as smoothly as possible.

From finding out about access to telephones to catering for your religious beliefs, our online guide helps you be prepared. Visit www.which.co.uk/stayinginhospital for more ideas.

OUR RESEARCH

In July 2008, we interviewed 2,098 adults (aged 16-plus) across the UK about their experiences of out-of-hours services. In July, we also interviewed 224 people living in four primary care trust areas of England (Greenwich, Suffolk, Cornwall and Newcastle) about out-of-hours services in their area. In August 2008, 1,111 Which? online panel members completed a survey on their experience of certain out-of-hours services, and in September 2008 we interviewed 12 people in-depth by phone.

Which? says

Our research shows that more choice in healthcare is leading to lack of awareness and possible confusion for patients, and that they're being passed between services too often.

All consumers, no matter where they live, need to know what services are available and how to access them. Health service websites, in particular, must provide clear and comprehensive information.

People also need to know what they should expect from out-of-hours services – which also means seeking their views and using these to improve the quality and consistency of services.

We have sent our findings to government health departments, NHS Direct and the Healthcare Commission.

The Commission's recent service review also calls on the English government to clarify service provision and simplify the ways services are accessed.

3 Emergency services

Accident & Emergency

The hospital A&E department is used for emergency injuries and illnesses, such as breathing difficulties, blood loss and suspected broken bones. They're usually open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Our findings

A&E was 'top of mind' when we asked about out-of-hours services. But one in 10 people didn't believe that they got the right care. Waiting times were the biggest gripe. And surprisingly, one in three of those dissatisfied with A&E mentioned staff knowledge and skills. Other complaints were

about being kept informed and customer service.

Practical issues we heard about included difficulties with getting to A&E on public transport, and parking.

Emergency numbers

Use 999 – or the European-wide number 112 – when someone needs immediate emergency care, such as for a suspected heart attack or major injuries.

Dispatchers take 999 calls and organise responses (by paramedics or a solo responder) or, for less serious cases, a call-back assessment. Emergency care practitioners

may respond to complex, less urgent 999 calls. Community responders (trained volunteers) may attend in rural areas.

Our findings

Users reported high levels of satisfaction, particularly around receiving the most appropriate and best care at the right time.



Cut-out-and-keep guide to out-of-hours care

which?

We asked Dr Fay Wilson – a GP and medical director of an out-of-hours GP co-operative – to help compile our guide to using out-of-hours services. Simply fill in the details where necessary and keep this sheet somewhere handy

Which service should I use?

Use these questions to help you think through your options

- Do I have a medical emergency requiring an ambulance response or Accident & Emergency?

IF NOT:

- Can I try anything that's worked before for this condition?
- Has my doctor or hospital advised me what to do if this happens?
- Can I treat myself at home and wait until my GP's surgery opens?



- Can I find the information I need myself, such as from a health encyclopedia or the library on both the NHS Direct and NHS 24 websites?
- Could I get phone advice from NHS Direct, NHS 24 or my GP out-of-hours service?
- Could I see a pharmacist for a medicine-related query or a minor ailment?
- Is it a minor ailment or illness that my local walk-in or minor injuries service could treat?
- Do I need to see a GP in person? Would they need to visit me because I can't leave the house, or can I get out to them at an out-of-hours centre?

Out-of-hours contact numbers

Fill in the details of local services so you have instant access to them if someone falls ill

HELPLINES: NHS Direct (England/Wales): 0845 46 47
NHS 24 (Scotland): 08454 24 24 24

GP names and surgery contacts:	Walk-in centres (or other local services):
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.....
GP out-of-hours service contacts and opening times:	Other health or social care service:
.....
.....
.....
.....	Other useful contacts:
.....
24-hour pharmacy contacts:
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Getting the best out-of-hours care

Forward planning will ensure you're not caught out

BANK HOLIDAY DATES

Check bank holidays, especially if travelling around the UK – they may differ in other UK countries.

BANK HOLIDAY OPENING

Check your GP's surgery opening hours – assume it will be closed on a bank holiday or at the weekend. Many town and supermarket pharmacies will be open, except for major holidays such as Christmas Day, but check first.

MEDICATION

Order repeat prescriptions in advance if they're due to be collected over a holiday period, or ask your GP for a post-dated prescription. If you run out, a pharmacy can give you an emergency short supply of repeat-prescription medication, but you may have to pay.

STAYING ELSEWHERE IN THE UK

Before you travel around the UK, consider asking your GP for a printout of your medical history and medication. If you use a service such as NHS Direct, tell them you're away

from home. You can register as a temporary resident with a GP to receive NHS treatment.

FINDING AN OUT-OF-HOURS PHARMACY

Details of out-of-hours pharmacies should be available through NHS Direct and NHS 24, and the Ulster Chemists' Association site for Northern Ireland (see www.uca.org.uk for more information).

PREPARATION

Out-of-hours services often have no information about you, so keep your GP details, repeat prescription list, appointment cards, test results, expectant mother records and any other important information handy, so they have as much information as possible.

COMMUNICATION

Make sure any nurse, doctor or out-of-hours employee is aware of your needs, such as hearing problems, allergies or disabilities. If you're having trouble understanding a visiting health professional, ask them to explain again.

