

Referral to hospital

A guide to referral and waiting times

This information sheet tells you about what happens when your doctor refers you to a hospital specialist. It covers waiting times, changing appointments and who to contact for more information.

Making a referral

If the doctor is referring you to hospital, they will contact the relevant hospital department shortly after they have seen you. At this point, it is really important to make sure that the practice has your current address and phone number, so that we can pass on the correct details to the hospital, so let us know if this has changed.

From this point onwards, the hospital will be dealing with you directly. We recommend you ask your doctor which hospital and department you are being referred to, in case you need to get in touch with them later on.

Waiting times

The hospital department will try to make your waiting time as short as possible. They will send you an appointment as soon as they can. The length of time you have to wait will depend on your condition and the level of demand for the service.

For some specialties, patients may have to wait for up to 12 weeks or more. Some patients will be seen sooner than this but unfortunately this is not possible in every case.

Waiting-time guarantees

The Scottish Government has established different 'Waiting-Time Guarantees' which set out how long waiting-times should be for a range of activities, for example:

- your first appointment at Outpatients
- tests like endoscopy, CT scan and ultrasound
- treatments, for example, an operation.

Some waiting times are significantly longer since the coronavirus pandemic but the hospital teams are working constantly to bring these waiting times down.

Going on holiday?

If you are waiting to hear about an appointment and you are about to go on holiday, please let the hospital know when you will be away. This allows them to make sure they don't send you an appointment for while you are on holiday. Use the contact details on your appointment letter.

What if my condition changes?

If, while you are waiting for an appointment your circumstances change, your symptoms get worse or better, please contact your GP.

Scan the QR code or visit
nhslothian.scot/yourrights/health-rights-waiting-times
for waiting time estimates and to view this leaflet
in Polish | Mandarin | Urdu | Arabic | Turkish



Your appointment

You will receive an appointment letter or a letter asking you to phone and arrange an appointment. You will usually be offered the next available appointment, at any of our sites in NHS Lothian or one of our healthcare partners. You should be given at least seven days notice of your appointment.

What to do if the hospital hasn't been in touch?

You can phone the hospital department concerned to see what's happening with your referral.

Hospital Switchboards

- East Lothian Community Hospital
01620 642 7000
- St John's Hospital, Livingston
01506 523 000
- Princess Alexandra Eye Pavilion
0131 536 1628
- Western General Hospital
0131 537 1000.

Central NHS Switchboard 0131 536 1000

- Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh
- Royal Hospital for Children and Young People
- Lauriston Buildings

These are general switchboard numbers so you will need to tell the operator which department you were referred to, e.g. orthopaedics, urology, cardiology etc.

Please avoid making an appointment with your GP about your referral unless your condition changes. If you have a query, it is normally best for you to enquire about the progress of your referral with the hospital department directly. Practice reception staff can help with queries, but normally only if you are unable to contact the hospital yourself.

What to do if you can't make your appointment

Please contact the department, using the phone number on your appointment letter, as soon as you can. Then they can give your appointment to someone else and agree a more suitable time with you.

Turning down appointments

Please remember that if you turn down two reasonable offers of appointment, the hospital may send you back to your GP and your waiting time will start again.

Worried about how to get to your appointment?

If you need more information about anything to do with your appointment, for example, how to find the department, transport, access, please phone the hospital using the phone number in your appointment letter.

How to make a comment, suggestion or complaint

We welcome all feedback on patients' experiences of our services and use it to drive improvements. You can give your feedback to us at the surgery or use our NHS Lothian Patient Experience Team.

If you would like to make a complaint about the hospital service that you have received, please contact the Patient Experience Team. You can do this via a number of routes, including:

- In writing
- By telephone
- By email
- Face to face



Contact us at:

NHS Lothian, Waverley Gate,
2 – 4 Waterloo Place, Edinburgh, EH1 3EG
Telephone: 0131 536 3370 (9am–2pm)
Email: feedback@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk