

To everyone in Somerset

Access to GP services

Your local GP surgery and all the staff who work across the county, continue to work hard to support the health and care needs of their communities. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the vaccination programme, they continue to care for people in Somerset. They have provided face-to-face, telephone and online support for patients who have needed them.

As a result of COVID-19, many local people's physical and mental health needs have increased. In some cases, this is due to the lockdown measures in place and the impact this has had on people. We also know that people may have also delayed contacting their GP about their healthcare needs over the past few months because they may not have wanted to put pressure on vital services, or might have been concerned about accessing healthcare during the pandemic.

This means that GP practices are experiencing very high numbers of patients now trying to contact them. From January to March 2020, approximately 779,000 appointments took place; an average of 260,000 per month.

In the same period for 2021, approximately 837,000 appointments were provided across Somerset GP practices, with an average of 279,000 per month – this means we have already provided an additional 7.5% increase in appointments in the latest three-month period. 47% of all appointments were provided face-to-face.

GP practices have taken a leading role in supporting the roll out of the Somerset COVID vaccination programme, delivering around 70% of the total vaccinations through GP-led community sites. As at 16 May, over 570,000 vaccines have now been given across the county to the highest priority groups.

The vaccination programme has been carried out in addition to day-to-day GP practice work. As a result, you have probably noticed a delay in getting through to your practice or getting an appointment; this is, in part, due to the volume of patients trying to get through because of the backlog of people needing care. Practices are doing all they can including installing additional phone lines and offering online contact via their websites.

While face-to-face appointments continue to be offered to those based on clinical need, many issues can be resolved during a phone consultation without patients having to travel to a surgery. You should expect to be asked about your problems in advance by a member of the practice team. This is to ensure that your problem is dealt with quickly and effectively and you are directed to the most appropriate healthcare team for your needs.

GP services are required to follow national guidelines to prevent the transmission of COVID. This includes social distancing and wearing face coverings. Please follow these requirements which are there to keep you and the GP team safe. Practices are still operating at reduced capacity in the buildings and have very limited space in waiting areas; appointment times are longer to allow for cleaning in between patients and changing of personal protective equipment by staff.

Because of the backlog of people needing care, there are currently longer waits for routine appointments than usual at some practices. The NHS in Somerset is doing all it can to reduce waiting times both in General Practice and in the Hospitals. We know that there are many people needing healthcare help.

We understand how anxious people must feel when they simply want to talk to someone about a healthcare concern or worry and how frustrating it must be to not be able to get through on the phone or have to wait for an appointment.

We are asking the people of Somerset to continue to be patient with us. We are working hard to ensure access to all that need us but we need your support to help us do this. Unfortunately, we continue to see a small number of people taking their frustrations out on staff. This is unacceptable. The NHS has a zero tolerance approach to abusive and threatening behaviour towards healthcare staff and we will take action against anyone who threatens practice staff.

Our staff care about their patients and are simply trying to do their best to support everyone's healthcare needs in the most suitable way, despite the current levels of demand. We need you to support your local GP practice and allow them to do their jobs without fear of abuse.

You can also continue to support us by seeking help when you need it from the most appropriate service. We will refer you if we think you need another service.

There are a range of options to get help in addition to your GP surgery:

Pharmacy

As lockdown eases, don't forget your local high-street pharmacist can provide health advice and help with minor illnesses like coughs and colds, sunburn, hay fever and diarrhoea. You don't need an appointment and they can even provide you with the right medicines at the same time.

Mindline

If you, or someone you know, is struggling with their mental wellbeing, our 24/7 Mindline is open to people of all ages. Just ring 01823 276 892.

111 First

Our 111 service is available 24/7 to provide advice, treatment and care. Just ring 111 or visit <https://111.nhs.uk/> and the service will provide advice and refer you to another service if you need it; if you need to be seen in person they can book you a time slot.

Minor injury units

Don't forget that A&E is for life-threatening emergencies. There's also a network of minor injury units to provide the treatment you need – often they'll see you quicker and closer to home.

Please continue to help us keep Somerset safe and thank you for everything that you have done to support us.

With all best wishes



David Heath

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