

Factsheet 5

Dental care: NHS and private treatment

May 2017

About this factsheet

This factsheet explains how to find an NHS dentist, charges for NHS treatment, and how receiving certain benefits or the NHS low income scheme may help with the cost of NHS treatment.

It looks at what you can expect if you receive NHS dental treatment and what you can do if you are dissatisfied with the care you receive. The factsheet also looks briefly at private dental treatment.

The information in this factsheet is correct for the period May 2017 – March 2018. Benefit rates are reviewed annually and take effect in April but rules and figures can sometimes change during the year.

The information in this factsheet is applicable in England. Please contact Age Cymru, Age Scotland or Age NI for their version of this factsheet. You can find their contact details at the back of the factsheet.

Contact details for organisations mentioned in this factsheet can be found in the Useful organisations section.

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1 Recent developments

- Charges for NHS treatment are reviewed annually. This factsheet lists charges that apply from 1 April 2017.
- In England from 1 April 2017, NHS Band 1 treatment costs £20.60, Band 2 costs £56.30 and Band 3 costs £244.30. See section 6.

2 Finding a dentist who offers NHS treatment

You can look for a dentist in your neighbourhood or further afield. Dental practices do not work within catchment areas, so you can choose a practice convenient for you. To identify practices that offer NHS treatment, you can:

- visit www.nhs.uk and use 'Find local services' to enter a postcode or town. This gives a list of practices, indicates those currently accepting patients for NHS treatment and gives patient feedback for each practice
- contact your local Healthwatch and ask for details of local practices
- contact NHS England by telephone for a list of practices. If you tried but were unable to find a practice that can treat you as an NHS patient, ask for contact details of the Local Area Team who can advise your options.

Having identified suitable practices, contact them and ask when they can offer an appointment for a new patient. They may not be able to offer one immediately.

3 Urgent and out-of-hours treatment

You should seek urgent treatment if you experience severe pain that is not eased by over-the-counter painkillers, for example due to an abscess or acute infection. Band 1 charges apply for treatment you need to deal with the immediate problem. If the dentist issues a prescription, you must pay your usual prescription charge.

Your regular dentist may offer urgent treatment *during* normal working hours. If you need urgent treatment *outside* normal working hours, call the surgery and listen to the message telling you how to access care urgently.

If you do not have a regular dentist and need urgent treatment, call NHS 111. They can advise you and provide information about local out-of-hours dental services.

4 Check-up and treatment plans

A check-up allows the dentist to review your oral health – your mouth, teeth, and gums – and discuss how you can reduce your risk of dental decay, gum disease and mouth cancer.

Regular check-ups are important even when you wear full dentures. The dentist can check your mouth and fit of your dentures. Dentures usually need replacing at least every five years because the shape of your mouth changes over time.

NHS and private treatment

Most dentists offer NHS and private treatment, so make sure the dentist knows you want NHS treatment. A dentist should offer the full range of NHS treatment and tell you if private treatment is your only option for a particular problem. They should tell you the associated costs for NHS and any private treatment you agree to.

Practices contracted to provide NHS treatment should display an up to date NHS price list in a prominent place in their premises.

Note

The NHS provides 'clinically necessary' treatment to keep your mouth, teeth and gums healthy and free from pain. This does not include treatment for purely cosmetic reasons such as large white fillings or white crowns on back teeth, veneers or tooth whitening.

Discussing your treatment needs and options

After your check up, ask the dentist to explain:

- any dental and/or gum problems
- your treatment options for each problem and pros and cons of each
- whether there are NHS and private options and how they differ
- if treatment is complex, ask how many times have they carried it out
- what would happen if you do nothing
- what course of treatment you need and how many visits are required
- how much the treatment will cost
- if it is NHS treatment, which of the three NHS charge bands the treatment falls into and when you need to pay
- the estimated cost of private treatment, if necessary for part or all of the treatment
- what the dentist and what you can do, to prevent further problems.

Note

The dentist should give you a written treatment plan. This describes the Band 2 or Band 3 course of NHS treatment, or a mix of NHS and private treatment, if that is what you need. The plan should include the cost of all treatment to be provided.

If you are having a '*dental appliance*' fitted, for example a crown, bridge or denture, you can ask for a statement of manufacture. This shows details of the device, who it was prescribed by and made by, confirmation it was made just for you and meets legal standards.

If you are unsure or unhappy about proposed NHS treatment, you can seek a second opinion. If the second opinion is different, it is important to remember dentists have the right to disagree and prefer different options. If you have a second opinion, you pay a Band 1 charge for this new consultation as described in section 6.

The Oral Health Foundation provides information about dental care and types of treatment.

Gum disease and mouth cancer

Gum disease is a significant threat to teeth as it damages tissues that support teeth and hold them in your jaw. Teeth can become loose and ultimately fall out. Gums that regularly bleed when you brush your teeth could be a sign of gum disease and a prompt to go for a check-up. Smokers are at greater risk of gum disease than non-smokers.

Most cases of mouth cancer are linked to tobacco and alcohol consumption. You are at greater risk if you regularly consume them together. The tradition in some communities of chewing tobacco or paan is particularly dangerous.

For information about gum disease visit www.nhs.uk/conditions/gum-disease/ and mouth cancer www.nhs.uk/conditions/cancer-of-the-mouth/.

5 Frequency of check-ups

Guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) helps dentists to decide how often you should have a check-up. For adults this could be between 3 and 24 months. If you have good teeth and gums, it is likely to be between 12 and 24 months.

Based on your oral health and the risk of future disease, you and your dentist can agree a date for your next check-up. The dentist should record this in your notes at the end of a course of treatment.

6 NHS charging system

NHS treatment falls into one of three charging bands. The most expensive part of your course of treatment decides the amount you pay. The number of visits needed to complete the course does not affect the charge.

Charges from 1 April 2017 are:

- **Band 1** – £20.60

This charge covers an examination, diagnosis including x-rays, advice on how to prevent further problems, preventive care such as application of fluoride and a scale and polish by the dentist.

- **Band 2** – £56.30

This charge covers everything under Band 1 plus fillings, root canal work and extractions. The charge is not affected by the number of fillings or extractions in your agreed course of treatment.

- **Band 3** – £244.30

This charge covers everything under Bands 1 and 2 plus crowns, bridges and dentures. New dentures can be fitted with a metal identification tab on manufacture. This reduces the risk of losing your dentures, should you need to go into hospital or live in a care home.

There is no charge for taking out stitches, stopping bleeding or writing an NHS prescription. Your usual NHS charges apply to dispense the prescription.

There is no charge for simple denture repairs. You are not usually charged if dentures require adjusting in the first few weeks after fitting.

There is no charge if you need more treatment at the same charge level (for example another filling) within two months of seeing your dentist.

Missed appointments. Dentists cannot charge for missed appointments. However, if you continually miss appointments, they may not agree to treat you in future.

Urgent or out-of-hours treatment is charged at Band 1.

The replacement of lost or accidentally damaged dentures is charged at 30 per cent of Band 3. In 2017 / 18, this is £73.29.

Second opinions. You must pay the first dentist a Band 1 charge for the consultation and the second dentist a Band 1 charge for their consultation. You must pay for subsequent treatment you agree to, according to the Band it falls into.

7 Help with cost of NHS dental treatment

Entitlement to free NHS dental treatment or help towards the cost of treatment is based on your income and savings.

Automatic entitlement for help with NHS dental charges

You, and your partner if you have one, are automatically entitled to free NHS dental treatment if you receive Pension Credit Guarantee Credit.

You are entitled to free treatment if you are included in an award of Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or income-related Employment and Support Allowance. You must show your award letter to the dental receptionist as proof of entitlement.

You may be entitled to free treatment if you receive Universal Credit and meet eligibility criteria. Go to the NHS Choices website for information www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcosts/Pages/universal-credit.aspx.

NHS Low Income Scheme

If you are not automatically entitled to help but have a low income and savings of less than £16,000 (£23,250 if you live permanently in a care home), you may be entitled to help through the NHS Low Income Scheme (LIS). Whether this is *full* or *partial* help with dental charges depends on your financial circumstances.

You apply by completing the application form HC1. If you live permanently in a care home and receive financial help from the local authority to pay your fees, complete short form HC1 (SC). You can request copies of either form by calling 0300 123 0849.

If you are entitled to *full* help you receive an HC2 certificate; if entitled to *partial* help you receive an HC3 certificate.

Call the NHS Business Service Authority Customer Contact Team if you have questions about the LIS or need help completing the form.

Note

You can only receive help with the cost of NHS dental treatment through the NHS LIS or the benefits mentioned above. There is no support towards private dental treatment costs.

Entitlement to help with other NHS costs

Entitlement to help with health costs – because you receive certain benefits or because you have an HC2 or HC3 certificate – includes help with costs associated with other NHS charged-for services.

You can get help with the cost of NHS prescriptions and sight tests (if you are not already exempt from paying for them), buying new glasses and, in some circumstances, the cost of travel to receive NHS treatment.

The Department of Health leaflet HC11 Help with health costs tells you about the help you can get. The NHS low income scheme is described in factsheet 61, *Help with health costs*.

8 Community dental services

Many dentists can treat people with special needs at their practice. If you cannot get there because of a disability or physical or mental health condition, your dentist can refer you to a specialised dental service. This is usually provided by the community dental service either at their own premises or in a mobile unit that visits you at home or in a care home.

To find out about community dental services in your area, contact NHS England. They can give you contact details for your Area Team who know what is available locally. Alternatively, your local Healthwatch may be able to advise you.

9 Dental care for care home residents

Care homes have a duty to ensure your healthcare needs are met. Ask the care home manager how you can access a dentist offering NHS treatment for regular or emergency care. A dentist or hygienist can provide guidance to staff on how to assist in cleaning another person's teeth if a resident needs help or is unable to clean their teeth. The Alzheimer's Society has useful information describing some of the problems people with dementia may face at different stages of their illness.

If you wear full dentures, you still need regular checks to review the health of your mouth and fit of your dentures. Dentures are likely to need replacing at least every five years, as your gums and jaw bone will eventually shrink and affect the fit of your dentures.

Lost dentures can be a problem if you cannot clean your dentures yourself or if you need hospital treatment. New dentures can be marked for easy identification, so ask your dentist about denture marking. Alzheimer's Society information includes a DIY method of temporarily marking dentures.

10 Dentists and other dental professionals

The role of the General Dental Council

To practice in the UK, dentists and all dental care professionals - dental nurses, dental hygienists, dental technicians, clinical dental technicians, dental therapists and orthodontic therapists - must register with the General Dental Council (GDC). The GDC publishes '*Standards for dental professionals*' that registered professionals must abide by. You can view the GDC register online and search for registration details of any practicing dental professional.

Dental nurses. They work closely with and support the dentist during and following patient treatment.

Dental hygienists. They have a role in promoting oral health and usually work alongside the dentist. Their services include thorough scaling and polishing, managing gum disease and applying topical fluoride and fissure sealants treatments. They may have had training that allows them to offer tooth whitening under the supervision of a dentist.

Dental technicians. They make dentures, bridges, crowns and braces to a dentist's prescription.

Clinical dental technicians. They make the dental appliances mentioned above. If you have no teeth (the technical term is '*edentulous*') and no implants, a clinical dental technician can accept you directly for the provision or maintenance of full dentures. In all other situations, they must work to a dentist's prescription.

Orthodontic therapists. They work alongside orthodontists (specialist dental practitioners) and can carry out a limited range of treatments and procedures to straighten and improve the alignment of teeth.

The GDC produces a leaflet *Smile* explaining the standards of care you can expect from dental professionals, what to expect from a visit to a dental professional and your options if you are unhappy with the experience.

Safety concerns and 'Fitness to practise' complaints

The GDC can investigate complaints against dental professionals working for the NHS or privately. It can investigate where a complaint calls into question whether a dental practitioner should be able to remain on the register and continue to practise. This might arise due to provision of very poor quality treatment, safety issues related to poor hygiene practice, inappropriate behaviour, being under the influence of drink or drugs or fraud.

For most complaints, follow the procedures explained in sections 11 or 12.1 of this factsheet. However, if you are unsure whether your complaint is one the GDC can investigate, look on the GDC website or contact the GDC Customer Advice and Information Team.

10.1 'Direct access' to members of the dental team

You may be able to book an appointment to see a dental care professional listed in section 10, even if you have not been seen by or referred by a dentist.

This is known as '*direct access*' and not all dental care professionals offer this service. If they do, they must only work to the scope of their practice and offer what they are confident they have skills and competencies to provide.

Dental hygienists and other dental care professionals can legally only offer '*direct access*' treatment on a private basis. If they are employed by a dental practice, it depends on their employer's preference and whether the staff member wants and/or feels competent to work this way.

A dental practice offering a '*direct access*' service should make sure its publicity is clear about:

- the roles of different practitioners working in the practice
- what treatments are available through '*direct access*'
- how to book appointments, and
- what happens to ensure a patient is referred on appropriately if a practitioner decides they cannot provide the treatment needed.

A dental hygienist can set up in business without employing a dentist but if they do, they must have appropriate indemnity insurance and seek your informed consent before starting treatment. They should have explicit processes in place for referring you to a dentist for further advice or treatment.

There are treatments, such as tooth whitening, they can only offer through a dentist's prescription, with a dentist providing or being present on the premises when the first treatment is carried out. Dental therapists and clinical dental technicians can be trained in tooth whitening as an additional skill but the same conditions apply.

As these dental professionals may not have a dentist's prescription to work from, you should tell them about any medical or dental problems you have and they should keep a record of your treatment.

For further information about how '*direct access*' works, see www.gdc-uk.org/professionals/standards/direct-access.

11 Compliments and complaints about NHS treatment

You may want to let your dental practice know if you are pleased with their service. Many practices actively seek your feedback so they can make improvements.

Friends and Family Test

Dental practices must offer patients receiving NHS treatment a chance to provide anonymous feedback on their experience by answering the Friends and Family Test (FFT) question:

'How likely are you to recommend our dental practice to friends and family if they needed similar care or treatment?'

Response options are: Extremely likely; Likely; Neither likely nor unlikely; Unlikely; Extremely unlikely; or Don't know.

To allow you to explain your answer more fully, they may add a follow-up question such as *'what would have made your visit here better?'*

Dental practices should make sure they offer a range of written and/or electronic ways for you to give your views, so all patients have the opportunity to participate. Practices submit FFT data and each month NHS England publishes results for dental practices overall on their website, alongside results for other NHS services. Many practices publish their own results on their website.

Concerns and complaints

You can often resolve concerns about your treatment by speaking to your dentist. If this does not resolve the problem and you want to make a formal complaint, the practice must follow the NHS complaints procedure.

There must be a member of the team responsible for managing concerns and complaints. This includes explaining the complaints process and investigating and responding to your complaint in writing.

If you want to make a formal complaint, the practice should tell you how to contact the free, independent NHS Complaints Advocacy Service. This service is arranged by your local authority and can help you make your complaint if you wish.

If you are unhappy with the response to your complaint, the practice should explain your option to ask the Parliamentary & Health Service Ombudsman to investigate further.

If your complaint relates to a dentist's fitness to practice, see section 10. For information, see factsheet 66, *Resolving problems and making complaints about NHS services*.

12 Private dental treatment

Some dentists only accept private patients, whilst others offer both NHS and private treatment.

There are no official guidelines for the cost of private treatment. Fees are set by each practice, so you may want to shop around to get a general idea of fees charged by several local practices. They may have a price list for relatively simple treatments but this will not give an indication of the quality of work or cost of more complex work.

Dentists may offer different ways to pay for treatment. You may pay at the end of a course of treatment or take out an insurance policy to cover the cost up to an agreed limit. Another way is through a '*capitation scheme*'. This involves the dentist assessing your dental health, then asking you to make a fixed monthly payment, based on your expected level of treatment. Your dental needs and hence monthly payments are usually reviewed annually.

Note

It is advisable to discuss treatment options, ask for an estimated cost of proposed treatment and agree fees with the dentist before treatment starts. If expensive treatment is proposed, you may want to think further before agreeing to it or seek a second opinion.

12.1 Compliments and complaints about private treatment

Feedback, both positive and negative, helps practices understand patients' needs better, review their service and maintain high standards. If you have concerns about your treatment, you can often resolve them by speaking to your dentist without the need to make a formal complaint.

The NHS complaints procedure does not cover private treatment, even if the dentist offers NHS and private treatment. The practice has its own complaints procedure for private treatment. Ask about this when making your decision to join a practice offering private treatment only or before starting private treatment.

If you are unable to resolve your concerns or complaint with the practice, you can approach the Dental Complaints Service (DCS) which is funded by, but independent of, the General Dental Council. The DCS looks at less serious complaints and can be contacted by phone or in writing.

If your complaint relates to a dentist's fitness to practice, see section 10.

13 The role of the Care Quality Commission

Dental practices, dentists and other dental professionals who set up their own practice must register with the Care Quality Commission (CQC). The CQC inspects each practice to ensure it meets quality and safety standards. During an inspection, it looks at whether the practice is safe, effective, caring, responsive and well-led and publishes an inspection report on the CQC website.

The CQC cannot investigate individual complaints but is interested to hear about patient's experience of care. This informs the regulation and future inspection of dental services. You can complete a '*share your experience form*' on their website or call a dedicated number. The CQC does not normally reply individually to feedback but in some cases may contact you for further information.

Useful organisations

Alzheimer's Society

www.alzheimers.org.uk

Telephone 0300 222 1122

The Alzheimer's Society offers information and support to people living with dementia, their families and carers through its helpline and local branches.

Care Quality Commission

www.cqc.org.uk

Telephone 03000 616 161 (free call)

Independent regulator of adult health and social care services in England, covering NHS, local authorities, private companies or voluntary organisations and people detained under the Mental Health Act.

Dental Complaints Service

www.dentalcomplaints.org.uk

Telephone complaints helpline 020 8253 0800

The Dental Complaints Service assists dental patients and dental professionals to resolve complaints about private dental services. It is funded by, but independent of, the GDC.

General Dental Council

www.gdc-uk.org

Telephone customer advice and information team 020 7167 6000

The General Dental Council (GDC) is responsible for registering all dentists and dental care professionals who practise in the UK. You can access a register on its website. If you cannot access the internet, call their Customer Advice & Information Team.

Local Healthwatch and Healthwatch England

www.healthwatch.co.uk

Telephone 03000 683 000

Every local authority has a local Healthwatch that either provides free advocacy for those wanting to make a complaint about NHS services or can signpost you to your local NHS Complaints Advocacy Service. Search the Healthwatch England website or call for contact details of your local Healthwatch.

NHS Business Services Authority (Low income scheme)

www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/HealthCosts/1136.aspx

Telephone customer contact team 0300 330 1343 or 0191 279 0565

This NHS Business Services Authority manages the NHS Low Income Scheme.

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk

NHS Choices is a comprehensive web information service. Visit this website to find your nearest dentist. It can also help you find and use other NHS services, make choices about your health and learn more about the prevention and treatment of many health conditions.

NHS England

www.england.nhs.uk

Telephone 0300 311 22 33

NHS England can give contact details of dentists in an area and your Local Area Team. They publish Friends and Family Test results on their website.

NHS 111

Telephone 111

NHS 111 is the 24 hour helpline in England for advice on urgent but non-life-threatening symptoms, including dental related problems.

Oral Dental Health Foundation

www.dentalhealth.org

Telephone helpline 01788 539780

Independent charity dedicated to improving oral health. They run the National Dental Helpline and produce a range of leaflets on dental health and dental treatments.

Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman

www.ombudsman.org.uk

Telephone helpline 0345 015 4033

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman investigates complaints about NHS care in England. You must usually raise your complaint with the provider of the service before the Ombudsman will agree to be involved.

Age UK

Age UK provides advice and information for people in later life through our Age UK Advice line, publications and online. Call Age UK Advice to find out whether there is a local Age UK near you, and to order free copies of our information guides and factsheets.

Age UK Advice

www.ageuk.org.uk

0800 169 65 65

Lines are open seven days a week from 8.00am to 7.00pm

In Wales contact

Age Cymru

www.agecymru.org.uk

0800 022 3444

In Northern Ireland contact

Age NI

www.ageni.org

0808 808 7575

In Scotland contact

Age Scotland

www.agescotland.org.uk

0800 124 4222

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