Dental care: NHS and private treatment

About this factsheet

This factsheet explains what you can expect if you receive NHS dental treatment, the charging system for NHS treatment and what you can do if you are dissatisfied with the care you receive. It also briefly looks at private dental treatment.

Information in this factsheet is correct for the period April 2014 – March 2015.

This factsheet describes the situation in England. If you are in Wales readers should refer to Age Cymru’s factsheet FS5w. Readers in Scotland and Northern Ireland should contact their respective national Age UK offices for information specific to where they live – see section 13 for details.

For details of how to order other Age UK factsheets and information materials mentioned inside go to section 13.
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1 Recent developments

- Charges for NHS treatment are reviewed annually. This factsheet lists charges that apply from 1 April 2014.
- From 1st April 2014, Band 1 treatment costs £18.50, Band 2 treatment is £50.50 and Band 3 treatment is £219. (See section 5).

2 Finding a dentist who offers NHS treatment

A dentist offering NHS treatment no longer has to keep a register of NHS patients but may keep a list of regular patients and provide on-going treatment.

You can choose a dentist in your neighbourhood or further afield as unlike GP practices, dental practices do not operate a catchment area system. To find out which local practices offer NHS treatment and are accepting new patients, you can:

- Visit the NHS Choices website. Use a postcode or town to search for local practices and find out if they are accepting new adult NHS patients.
- Contact NHS England on 0300 311 22 33 for details of local dentists able to offer NHS treatment. Your local Healthwatch may also keep a list.

Dentists offering NHS treatment produce a practice leaflet giving details of the NHS services they have agreed to provide.

See section 12 for information about NHS Choices and local Healthwatch.

3 Check-up and treatment plans

The purpose of a check-up is to review your oral health – your mouth, teeth, gums and, if you wear them, the fit of your dentures. Regular check-ups are important even when you wear full dentures. This allows the dentist to check your oral health and the fit of your dentures. Dentures usually need replacing at least every five years because the shape of your mouth changes over time.

For adults, gum disease as well as tooth decay is a significant threat to teeth. A check-up offers the opportunity to discuss your oral health and risk factors that can increase your chance of gum disease and mouth cancer.
Gum disease and mouth cancer

Smokers are at greater risk of gum disease than non-smokers.

Most cases of mouth cancer are linked to tobacco and alcohol consumption, particularly if they are regularly consumed together. The tradition in some communities of chewing paan or tobacco is particularly dangerous. For more information about gum disease and mouth cancer look on the NHS Choices website. See section 12 for details.

Dental check-ups

If you need treatment, ask the dentist to explain:

- what course of treatment you need and how many visits may be necessary
- your options if there is more than one way to treat the problem
- which of the three NHS charge bands the treatment falls into (section 5)
- if private treatment is proposed for part or all of the treatment, what is the estimated cost of the private treatment.

NHS and private treatment

Most dentists offer NHS and private treatment. If a treatment is available on the NHS, the dentist should not imply that it isn’t and propose private treatment. You should be told whether private treatment for a particular problem is your only option.

If you are to receive a mix of NHS and private treatment, you should be given a written treatment plan (including costs).

If you are unsure or unhappy about the NHS treatment proposed, 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. See section 5 NHS Charging system.

The British Dental Health Foundation can provide information about dental care and treatments. See section 12.
4 Frequency of check-ups

Guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) helps dentists decide how often you should have a check-up.\(^1\) For adults this could be between 3 and 24 months. If you have good oral health, 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 should agree a date for your next check-up and record it in your notes at the end of a course of treatment. In the past there was a rule that you must visit a practice at least every 15 months to ‘stay on the register’. This is no longer the case.

5 NHS charging system

The amount you pay depends on which band the most expensive part of your course of treatment falls. You pay one charge for each completed course regardless of the number of visits required. Charges from 1 April 2014 are:

- **Band 1 – £18.50**
  
  This charge would cover 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 – £50.50**
  
  This charge covers everything covered by Band 1 plus fillings, root canal work and any extractions. The charge is not affected by the number of fillings or extractions in your agreed course of treatment.

- **Band 3 – £219.00**
  
  This charge covers everything covered by Bands 1 and 2 plus crowns, bridges or dentures. New dentures should be fitted with a metal identification tab on manufacture.

\(^1\) *Dental recall – recall interval between routine general check-ups. NICE October 2004 www.nice.org.uk/Guidance/CG19. Following a review in February 2014, it was agreed this guidance should be placed on the 'static list' for review every 5 years.*
There is no charge – for taking out stitches, stopping bleeding or writing an NHS prescription. 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 – charged at Band 1.

Replacement of lost or accidentally damaged dentures – £65.70. This is 30% of Band 3.

Second opinions – if you are unhappy with your treatment plan you have a right to get a second opinion from another dentist. However you must pay the first dentist a band 1 charge for the consultation and also pay the second dentist for their consultation and any subsequent treatment.

Note: NHS treatment aims to ‘secure and maintain oral health’ and does not include treatment for purely cosmetic reasons such as veneers, large white fillings or white crowns on back teeth or tooth whitening. Only treatment deemed ‘clinically necessary’ is provided as NHS treatment.

5.1 Help with NHS charges

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

You, and your partner if you have one, are automatically entitled to free NHS treatment if you receive the Guarantee Credit part of Pension Credit. You need to show your award letter when you visit the dentist as proof of your entitlement.

You are also entitled to free NHS dental treatment if you are included in an award of Income Support or income-related Employment and Support Allowance.
If you are on a low income and have savings of less than £16,000 (£23,250 if you live in a care home) you may be entitled to full or partial help through the NHS Low Income Scheme (LIS).

You can collect a copy of the application form (HC1) from Jobcentre Plus offices, by calling the NHS Business Services Authority Customer Contact Team (CCT) or your dentist may have one.

**Note:** There is a special short form for residents of care homes who receive financial help from the local authority to pay their fees. You can request this form from the NHS Business Services Authority CCT. See section 12.

If you receive the Guarantee Credit part of Pension Credit, other benefits mentioned above or help through the LIS you are also entitled to help with other NHS costs. These include the cost of 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 more about the help you can get. The NHS low income scheme is described in more detail in Age UK’s Factsheet 61, *Help with health costs*.

**Note:** You cannot receive help with the cost of private dental treatment through the LIS or if you receive other benefits mentioned above.

### 6 Urgent and out-of-hours treatment

Urgent treatment can be offered for severe pain not eased by over-the-counter painkillers, for an abscess or acute infection. Band 1 charges apply for any treatment you need to deal with the immediate problem.

Your regular dentist may offer urgent treatment during normal working hours. Outside normal working hours, call the surgery on the usual number and you should be told how to access urgent care.

If you don’t have a regular dentist:

- Call NHS 111 if you feel you need urgent treatment. They can advise you and have information about local out-of-hours dental services.

See section 12 for information about NHS 111.
7 **Community dental services**

Many dentists are able to treat people with special needs in their surgery. If you are unable to get to the surgery because of a disability or physical or mental health condition, each area provides a community dental service for people who may not otherwise seek or be able to receive dental care. If your dental practice cannot offer home visits, they may be able to direct you to ones that can. Alternatively, contact your local Healthwatch for information about the community based service (see section 12).

8 **Dental care for care home residents**

Compliance with the Care Quality Commission ‘Essential Standards of Quality and Safety’ requires care home and social care providers to ensure residents receive the healthcare they need, which means their dental and oral healthcare too.

If you live in a care home you should be able to make the same choices about your dental health as you made when living in your own home. Ask the care home manager what arrangements are in place to allow you to see a dentist for regular or emergency care.

If you wear dentures, you should have regular checks to review the health of your mouth and fit of your dentures. As the shape of your mouth changes over time, your dentures are likely to need replacing at least every five years.

Lost dentures can be a problem if you are unable to clean your own dentures or during a hospital stay. Dentures can be marked for easy identification, so ask your dentist about this. New dentures should have a metal identification tab fitted on manufacture.

9 **Registration of dentists and other dental professionals**

Dentists and a range of 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) to practise in the UK.
The GDC produces leaflets on the standards of care you can expect from dental professionals, what to expect from a visit to the dentist and your options should you be unhappy with the experience. They keep a register of dental practitioners that you can check to be sure the dental practitioner you see is registered.

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

*Dental technicians* make dentures, bridges, crowns and braces to a dentist’s prescription.

*Clinical dental technicians* also make the dental appliances mentioned above but if a patient has no teeth (the technical term is to be ‘edentulous’) they can accept them directly for the provision or maintenance of full dentures without a referral from a dentist. In all other situations they must work to a dentist’s prescription.

‘Fitness to practise’ complaints

The GDC has the power to investigate complaints against dental professionals working privately or for the NHS, if the complaint calls into question whether they should be able to remain on the register and continue to practise. This could include providing very poor quality treatment, inappropriate behaviour, being under the influence of drink or drugs, safety issues related to poor hygiene practice and fraud.

For most complaints you would need to follow procedures explained in sections 10 or 11.1 in this factsheet.

However if you are unsure whether your complaint comes within the remit of GDC, look on the GDC website or contact the GDC Customer Advice and Information Team. See section 12.
9.1 **Registration with and inspection by the Care Quality Commission**

Dental practices and dental professionals who set up in independent practice must register with the Care Quality Commission (CQC). The CQC inspects each practice at least every two years to ensure it meets quality and safety standards and publishes the inspection report on its website.

Although they cannot investigate individual complaints, the CQC is interested to hear about your experience of care as it helps inform the regulation and inspection of services. There is a ‘share your experience form’ on their website as well as a number to call. They do not normally reply individually to feedback but in some cases may contact you for further information. See section 12.

9.2 **‘Direct access’ to members of the dental team**

Changes introduced in May 2013 made it possible for a patient to book an appointment to see a dental hygienist without first having been seen by or referred by a dentist. Prior to this, except in some circumstances relating to the fitting of full dentures by clinical dental technicians, members of the dental team had to work to the direction of a dentist’s prescription.

All dental care professionals listed in section 9 were affected by these changes and like hygienists, must only work to the scope of their practice.

Not all hygienists will offer a ‘direct access’ service. It will depend on factors such as their employer’s preference and whether they wish to and feel competent to do so.

Hygienists can carry out tasks within the full scope of their practice but must only offer what they are confident they have the skills and competencies to provide. You should tell them about any medical or dental problems you have and they should keep a record of your treatment.

Dental practices that offer a ‘direct access’ service should make sure their 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 will happen if a practitioner decides they cannot provide the treatment needed.
If a hygienist sets up in business without employing a dentist, 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, that they can only offer through a dentist’s prescription with a dentist providing or being present when the first treatment is carried out.

Dental hygienists and other dental care professionals are legally only able to offer ‘direct access’ treatment on a private basis.

10 **Complaints about NHS treatment**

You can often resolve concerns about your treatment by speaking to your dentist. If this does not resolve the problem, the practice must follow the NHS complaints procedure. A member of the practice team will have responsibility for managing concerns and complaints. They should be able to explain the process and investigate and respond to your complaint.

If you intend to make a formal complaint, the dental practice should tell you how to contact the free, independent NHS Complaints Advocacy Service that can help you make your complaint. This service is arranged by your local authority. Contact your local authority or local Healthwatch to find out who your local advocacy provider is. See section 12.

If you are dissatisfied with the practice’s response, you can take your complaint to the Parliamentary & Health Service Ombudsman. Section 12.

Age UK’s Factsheet 66, *Resolving problems and making complaints about NHS services* explains the process is in more detail.

11 **Private dental treatment**

Some dentists only accept private patients. Others offer both NHS and private treatment.

Fees for private dental treatment are set by each practice, so it may be worth ‘shopping 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 won’t give an indication of the quality of work or cost of more complex work.
Some dentists 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 of treatment up to an agreed limit.

A ‘capitation scheme’ involves having a dental assessment and making 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 your treatment options and ask for an estimated cost of the proposed treatment. If expensive treatment is proposed you may want to think about it further or possibly seek a second opinion.

### 11.1 Complaints about private treatment

The NHS complaints procedure does not cover private treatment, even if the dentist concerned also offers NHS treatment. Practices offering private treatment will have their own complaints procedure. Ask about this when making your decision to join a practice.

If you are unable to resolve your complaint with the practice, you can approach the Dental Complaints Service (DCS) 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. See section 12.

### 12 Useful organisations

**British Dental Health Foundation**

The British Dental Health Foundation is an 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.

Smile House, 2 East Union Street, Rugby CV22 6AJ
Dental Helpline: 0845 063 1188
Email: mail@dentalhealth.org
Website: www.dentalhealth.org
Care Quality Commission

The Care Quality Commission is the independent regulator and inspector of all health services including dental services and of social care services.

CQC, Citygate, Gallowgate, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 4PA

Tel: 03000 61 61 61
Email: enquiries@cqc.org.uk
Website: www.cqc.org.uk

General Dental Council

The General Dental Council (GDC) is responsible for registering all dentists and dental care professionals who practise in the UK. They have a searchable register of dentists and dental care professionals on their website. If you do not have internet access, call the registration department on 020 7344 3740.

37 Wimpole Street, London W1G 8DQ
Tel: 0845 222 4141
Email: information@gdc-uk.org
Website: www.gdc-uk.org

GDC Dental Complaints Service

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.

Stephenson House, 2 Cherry Orchard Road, Croydon CR0 6BA
Complaints Helpline: 08456 120 540
Email: info@dentalcomplaints.org.uk
Website: www.dentalcomplaints.org.uk

Local Healthwatch and Healthwatch England

Healthwatch England is an organisation that aims to give a national voice to the key issues that affect people who use health and care services. Every local authority has a local Healthwatch.

Each local Healthwatch provides information, or signpost to others who can provide information, about local health and social care services.
Each *local Healthwatch* also 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 provider.

*Local Healthwatch* also gathers views and experiences that people (whether current users of services or not) have of the local health and social care system and uses them to challenge and shape provision of local services.

Through the *local Healthwatch* network, Healthwatch England will make sure the voices of local people are heard by the Secretary of State for Health and by those who commission and regulate health and social care services.

Contact Healthwatch England or search their website for contact details of your local Healthwatch.

Tel: 03000 683 000  
Email: enquiries@healthwatch.co.uk  
Website: www.healthwatch.co.uk

**NHS Choices**

NHS Choices is a comprehensive web information service to help you find and use NHS services, make choices about your health and learn more about the prevention and treatment of hundreds of health conditions. You can search this website, based on your postcode, to find your nearest dentist and other NHS services.

Website: www.nhs.uk

**NHS 111**

NHS 111 is the 24 hour helpline in England for advice on urgent but non-life-threatening symptoms, including dental related problems. Calls to 111 are free from landlines and mobiles. NHS 111 replaced NHS Direct in England  
Tel: 111
NHS Low income scheme

The NHS Business Services Authority manages the NHS Low Income Scheme. Contact their Customer Contact Team to request an application form (HC1) or the short form for local authority funded care home residents if you think you may be eligible for help with health costs through this scheme.

Customer Contact Team: 0845 850 1166
Website: www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/HealthCosts/1136.aspx

Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman can investigate complaints about NHS care. You must usually raise your complaint with the provider of the service before the Ombudsman service becomes involved.

Millbank Tower, Millbank, London, SW1P 4QP
Tel: 0345 015 4033
Email: phso.enquiries@ombudsman.org.uk
Website: www.ombudsman.org.uk

13 Further information from Age UK

Age UK Information Materials

Age UK publishes a large number of free Information Guides and Factsheets on a range of subjects including money and benefits, health, social care, consumer issues, end of life, legal, issues employment and equality issues.

Whether you need information for yourself, a relative or a client our information guides will help you find the answers you are looking for and useful organisations who may be able to help. You can order as many copies of guides as you need and organisations can place bulk orders.

Our factsheets provide detailed information if you are an adviser or you have a specific problem.
Age UK Advice

Visit the Age UK website, www.ageuk.org.uk, or call Age UK Advice free on 0800 169 65 65 if you would like:

- further information about our full range of information products
- to order copies of any of our information materials
- to request information in large print and audio
- expert advice if you cannot find the information you need in this factsheet
- contact details for your nearest local Age UK

Age UK

Age UK is the new force combining Age Concern and Help the Aged. We provide advice and information for people in later life through our, publications, online or by calling Age UK Advice.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65
Website: www.ageuk.org.uk

In Wales, contact:
Age Cymru: 0800 022 3444
Website: www.agecymru.org.uk

In Scotland, contact:
Age Scotland: 0845 125 9732
Website: www.agescotland.org.uk

In Northern Ireland, contact:
Age NI: 0808 808 7575
Website: www.ageni.org.uk
Support our work

Age UK is the largest provider of services to older people in the UK after the NHS. We make a difference to the lives of thousands of older people through local resources such as our befriending schemes, day centres and lunch clubs; by distributing free information materials; and taking calls at Age UK Advice on 0800 169 65 65.

If you would like to support our work by making a donation please call Supporter Services on 0800 169 87 87 (8.30 am–5.30 pm) or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/donate

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