

Health Services in Wales

If you have just arrived in Wales or are trying to find out more about how healthcare works in Wales, you may find the following information helpful.

What is the NHS?

The NHS (National Health Service) is the UK's state health service which provides treatment for UK residents through a wide range of health care services. Some services are free and some you may have to pay for.

What services are available?

General Practitioners (GP's) / Doctors Surgery or Health Centre

GPs are local family doctors who deal with the health of the local community. They normally work in 'GP practices' (Doctors surgeries), with other doctors, nurses, health visitors and midwives, and visits to the surgery are free to all UK residents. The GP is normally the first point of contact to enable you to access healthcare. If a GP cannot deal with your problem they will refer you to a specialist or to hospital. GP practices are normally open during the daytime and early evening, however, they will have an answering-machine message about where you can get medical help when the practice is closed.

You can either visit the GP in person or contact the practice by telephone. You can find local NHS GPs by looking in the phone book, contacting NHS Direct Wales (0845 46 47), searching for details on this website or by asking neighbours, friends and family. GPs can tell you whether you live in the area the surgery covers and whether it has room for new patients. Ask whether or not you have to make an appointment to see the doctor, and remember to arrive on time for any appointment you make. If you are concerned your spoken English is not good please take a friend or family member whose English is good with you.

Some GPs can charge for their services so you should check before attending.

NHS Direct Wales

NHS Direct Wales is a health advice and information service available 24 hours a day, every day. You can call NHS Direct Wales on 0845 46 47 if you are feeling ill and are unsure what to do, or for health information on a wide range of conditions, treatments and local health services. Calls are charged at a local rate of 4p per minute.

NHS Direct Wales can provide confidential interpreters in many languages, including (insert language). If you wish to use (insert language), ring the NHS Direct Wales telephone number 0845 46 47 and when your call is answered, say "....." (insert language in English). Wait on the line until you are connected to a (insert language) interpreter who will help NHS Direct Wales give you the health information or advice you need.

Pharmacists

Pharmacists (sometimes called Chemists) are experts on medicines and how they work. They can also offer advice on common complaints such as coughs, colds, aches and pains and other health issues, such as healthy eating and giving up smoking. They will prepare the prescriptions that your doctor writes for you. Advice from pharmacists is free but you may need to pay for your medication or you may be eligible for free prescriptions - your doctor will tell you. To find your nearest pharmacy you can search the online pharmacy database on this site.

Hospital

If your GP refers you to hospital for treatment, you will usually be given an appointment to see a consultant (specialist doctor). Depending on the medical problem, you may be treated as an in-patient (where you are admitted to a ward and stay there overnight or longer) or as an out-patient (where you visit the hospital for an appointment). If you think you need to see a specialist, you should visit your GP first and ask her or him to refer you.

Not all hospitals work within the NHS. There are private hospitals that can provide treatment but you will have to pay for it.

Accident and Emergency (A&E) Departments

Some (but not all) hospitals have Accident and Emergency departments. These departments are open 24 hours a day and deal with patients needing emergency treatment.

Emergency services: dial 999

If you need immediate medical assistance (for example you have had an accident), telephone 999. The call is free including from mobile phones. An operator will ask you which emergency service you need (Fire, Police or Ambulance). For urgent medical assistance ask for the ambulance service. Be ready to tell the emergency services what has happened and exactly where you are. The Emergency Medical Dispatcher will ask you questions about your condition, or that of the person you are calling about, and may offer advice on what to do until the ambulance arrives.

Dentists

Dentists offer routine and specialist care for teeth and gums. You don't need to wait until you have toothache to visit the dentist. In fact, a check-up every six months will help to prevent any major problems developing. Most dental practices take a mixture of NHS and private patients. Even if you are registered as an NHS patient, you will still have to pay some charges for dental treatment unless you are exempt from charges (for example if you are under 18, if you are pregnant or have had a baby in the past 12 months, or if you are claiming certain benefits). To find your nearest dentist you can search the online dental database on this site.

Opticians

Opticians will test your sight and examine the health of your eyes and they usually work from high street shops. After testing your eyes, if needed, some

opticians will also fit and supply spectacles (glasses) to a prescription. Unless you are entitled to a free eye test (for example if you are under 18, have diabetes or glaucoma, or are claiming certain benefits), you will have to pay for these services.

How to complain about NHS Services.

All NHS organisations have complaints procedures. If you wish to complain about an NHS service you can speak to the staff who provided the service or to the service's complaints manager. You can also put your complaint in writing, remembering to include;

- Who or what the complaint is about
- When and where the incident happened
- Any action you have already taken regarding the issue
- What you wish to get out of the complaint, such as an explanation, apology or change in procedure.

Complaints should be made within six months of the incident. A written complaint should receive a written acknowledgement within two working days.

Your complaint will be investigated in confidence and you will not be penalised for making a complaint. You should normally receive a written response to your complaint within twenty working days.

You can get help with making a complaint from your local Community Health Council (CHC), who should also be able to arrange for an interpreter if required.

If you are still unhappy?

There are two ways in which your complaint could be dealt with further:

- If the treatment or care complained about was received before 1st April 2006, you can ask for an Independent Review (can be a review or panel) of your complaint by contacting the Independent Complaints Secretariat for your area (see below for addresses). If you are still not satisfied after either the review or panel stages, you can complain to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.
- Where the treatment or care complained about was received on or after 1st April 2006, you can choose not to request an Independent Review but to take your complaint directly to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (see below for address)

Useful contacts.

Independent Complaints Secretariat

Mid and West Wales
PO Box 2
Brecon
Powys LD3 OXR
Tel: 01874 712748
Fax: 01874 712756

South Wales
PO Box 21
Cardiff
CF10 2ZR
Tel: 029 2037 6840
Fax: 029 20376826

North Wales
PO Box 125
Mold
CH7 1WH
Tel: 01352 700227
Fax: 01352 754649

Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

1 Ffordd yr Hen Gae
Pencoed
CF35 5LJ

Tel: 01656 641150
e-mail : ask@ombudsman-wales.org.uk
Website: www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk

Board of CHCs in Wales

Tel: 0845 644 7814
Website: www.patienthelp.wales.nhs.uk