



advice and support for older age

**Independent  
Age**

## Factsheet

# Living with health difficulties

As we age, we're more likely to experience ill-health or disability. This factsheet explains what help and support might be available to you and gives practical tips for managing your condition.

Call FREE on **0800 319 6789** Visit **[www.independentage.org](http://www.independentage.org)**

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## **About Independent Age**

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

The information in this factsheet applies to England only.

If you're in Wales, contact Age Cymru (0800 022 3444, [agecymru.org.uk](http://agecymru.org.uk)) for information and advice.

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland (0800 12 44 222, [agescotland.org.uk](http://agescotland.org.uk)).

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI (0808 808 7575, [ageni.org](http://ageni.org)).

In this factsheet, you'll find reference to our other free publications. You can order them by calling 0800 319 6789, or by visiting [independentage.org/publications](http://independentage.org/publications)

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# 1. Making the most of health services

It may sound obvious, but if you are living with health problems, it's important to make the most of the support available to you to stop your health from getting worse. This chapter covers the NHS services you can use and gives tips to help you get the most from them.

## Appointments with your GP

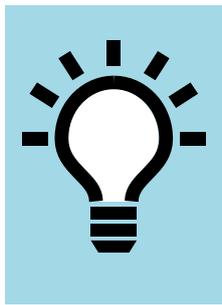
Your general practice is your first port of call for NHS care for any health difficulties.

Most surgeries give 8-10 minutes for a GP appointment. If you have a complicated problem and think you will need more time with your GP, ask the surgery for more than one appointment. This will give your GP more time to work through your health issue and it's also fairer on patients with an appointment after you.

If you have a list of concerns, write them down and prioritise them in advance -- your GP may not be able to deal with them all in one appointment.

If English is not your first language, bring someone with you or book a translator in advance via reception. You may need to request a double appointment to allow extra time to speak to the doctor.

## Good to know



If you're thinking of registering with an online GP service, check that they've been inspected by the Care Quality Commission ([03000 616161](tel:03000616161), [cqc.org.uk](http://cqc.org.uk)). Make sure they can see you whatever your health problem.

Check that they have access to your full medical record so they can see your full medical history and find out what happens if you need to see a GP in person.

## Before your appointment

To get the most out of your appointment, prepare what you are going to tell your GP. They will want to know:

- what your symptoms are (or any new symptoms if it is an ongoing condition)
- when they first started
- how long you have had them
- what makes your symptoms better or worse
- whether you think anything may have caused your symptoms, such as an injury or recent fall.

This also applies if you are going to see a specialist like a consultant. Sometimes it's the small details that help your doctor make decisions so don't hold back any information. There's no need to be embarrassed - while you may feel uncomfortable, you can rest assured the person examining you has heard it all before.

Write down any questions you want to ask before your appointment. Make sure you ask them all so you feel happy that you got what you came for after the appointment. Think about what you want to get out of the appointment and share this with the doctor.

## **On the day of your appointment**

- Bring a list of all your medication with you and be honest about what you are and aren't taking.
- If you refer to any recent letters from the hospital, bring them with you. Your GP may not have received a copy or it may not be on the system yet.
- Ask someone to go with you for complicated things - they can listen, ask questions and take notes for you.
- Be prepared to talk about different conditions in separate appointments. It's better to deal with one thing properly than rush through several things. Remember to wear your hearing aid if you use one.

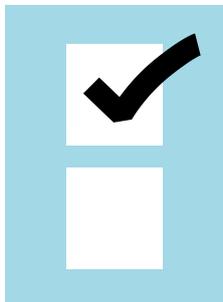
## **When you are with the doctor**

Don't be afraid to ask your doctor to repeat what she or he has told you and repeat back your understanding of what has been said to avoid any misunderstandings. They should explain your treatment options and any risks or benefits of having a particular treatment or medication. If this has not happened, ask.

Ask your doctor to explain any complicated medical terms that you don't understand or to use simple language. You could also ask them to write down the names of procedures or investigations so you can look them up later. Make sure you fully understand what the next steps are before you leave the room.

If you find it difficult to communicate with your doctor, ask questions or understand information given to you, you may want to ask a family member or friend to come with you. If you don't have someone who can do this, you may want to arrange to have an independent advocate. This is often a free service but what is available may depend on your local area. See our factsheet **Independent advocacy**.

## To do



It may be helpful to keep a file with a record of your medical history and medication. After each appointment, make a note of what happened.

## Referrals

If your GP refers you to a hospital consultant for more specialist advice or treatment, you usually have the right to choose which hospital you want to go to, or which consultant you want to see. If you are not offered a choice when your GP makes the referral, ask them to explain why and what options you have. Unless it is urgent, your consultant-led treatment should start no more than 18 weeks after the referral was made by

your GP. If your GP thinks you may have cancer, you have the right to be seen by a cancer specialist within two weeks of the referral.

## Good to know



You have a right to see your own health records if you want to. Ask your GP or consultant to arrange for you to see them. You can also make a formal subject access request for a copy of your records. You can contact the Information Commissioner's Office to find out how to do this ([0303 123 1113](tel:03031231113), [ico.org.uk](http://ico.org.uk)).

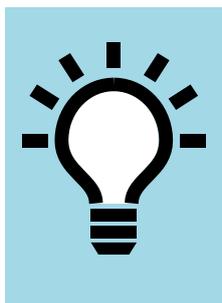
## Using your local pharmacy

A pharmacist can offer a range of services to help you to monitor and maintain your health, such as:

- advice on treating minor symptoms such as a stomach upset or sore throat
- organising your repeat prescriptions
- annual flu vaccinations
- reviewing your medications
- advice on living a healthy lifestyle, including diet and weight management.

If you get regular repeat prescriptions, ask your GP or pharmacist if they offer an Electronic Prescription Service (EPS). This lets you choose where you pick up your prescription so you can avoid unnecessary trips to your GP. You can also have your medication delivered to you.

## Good to know



Some pharmacies offer screening for conditions such as diabetes or allergies. They may also offer blood pressure checks and cholesterol checks.

## Footcare

Good foot care can help with mobility problems and also reduce the risk of falls.

If you have problems with your feet because of ageing or a long term condition like diabetes, osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis, you may be eligible for free foot care services from the NHS. Make an appointment to see your GP, and ask if they can refer you to a podiatrist (also called a chiropodist). Services will vary depending on where you live.

If you're not eligible for footcare from the NHS, you will need to arrange to see a podiatrist privately. You can search online on the NHS Choices website ([nhs.uk/Service-Search](https://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search)) or call NHS Direct (111). Or you can contact the Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists (020 7234 8620, [scpod.org](https://www.scpod.org)).

## Good to know



Some local Age UKs (0800 169 6565, [ageuk.org.uk](https://www.ageuk.org.uk)) offer a toenail clipping

service or information about local chiropody services.

## Eye care

It is important that you have your eyes checked regularly. An eye test will check the health of your eyes and could identify an eye condition before it significantly affects your eyesight. You're entitled to a free eye test at least every two years if you:

- are aged 60 or over
- have a condition like diabetes or glaucoma
- are registered as partially sighted or blind
- are aged 40 or over and have a family history of glaucoma
- or your partner receive certain means-tested benefits like Guarantee Pension Credit

If you're 70 or over or have diabetes or glaucoma, you may get a free eye test every year. Your optometrist will need to decide if you need this extra free test. To find opticians in your area, visit the NHS Choices website ([nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)) or contact NHS Direct ([111](https://111.nhs.uk)).

If you can't leave your home because of ill health or a disability, you may be eligible for an NHS eye test at home. A qualified optometrist will visit you at home to carry out the sight test. Call NHS Direct ([111](https://111.nhs.uk)) to find out more.

If an ophthalmologist (an eye specialist) has diagnosed your sight loss and completed a Certificate of Vision Impairment, you can register

with your council as sight impaired (also called partially sighted) or severely sight impaired (also called blind). You may get some specialist support from your council or services at reduced rates. For more information about sight loss, contact the Royal National Institute for the Blind ([0303 123 9999](tel:03031239999), [rnib.org.uk](http://rnib.org.uk)).

## Hearing care

If you think you may have a hearing problem, it's a good idea to book an appointment with your GP. They can carry out basic tests and then refer you to a specialist for a hearing test or other hearing services if necessary. This will usually be at the audiology department of an NHS hospital.

## Good to know



Many private opticians and hearing aid providers also offer free hearing tests. Or you can test your hearing with a quick test developed by the charity Action on Hearing Loss ([0808 808 0123](tel:08088080123), [actiononhearingloss.org.uk](http://actiononhearingloss.org.uk)).

## Dental care

Having an annual check-up with a dentist can help you to keep your teeth and gums healthy, even if you have false teeth.

You have to pay for dental care unless you receive Guarantee Pension Credit or qualify for help from the NHS Low Income Scheme – see our **Help with health costs** factsheet for more information. If you don't qualify, dental costs will

vary depending on the type of treatment you need. Call the NHS dental services helpline ([0300 330 1348](tel:03003301348)) for more information.

To find an NHS dentist, contact NHS Direct ([111](tel:111)), or visit the NHS Choices website ([nhs.uk/Service-Search](https://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search)). If you can't find a dentist who accepts NHS patients, you may have to go on a waiting list or pay privately for treatment.

If you have a mobility problem that means you find it difficult to visit your dentist, you may be able to arrange for a dentist to treat you in your own home. Contact NHS England ([0300 311 2233](tel:03003112233), [england.nhs.uk](https://www.england.nhs.uk)) and ask for information about community dental services in your area.

## **Vaccinations and screening programmes**

It's important to take up all the health screenings and vaccinations that are on offer - they can be life-saving.

### **Vaccinations**

- Flu vaccination

The NHS recommends that you have a free flu jab every year if you're over 65, have a long term health condition or if you have a weakened immune system. You can also get one if you are a carer. You can book an appointment at your GP surgery in the autumn, or ask your local pharmacy if they offer NHS flu vaccinations. If you get your vaccination at a pharmacy they will notify your GP for you. The vaccine will protect

you from many types of flu viruses. If you do get flu, it is likely to be milder if you have had the jab.

- Shingles vaccination

Shingles is a common, painful skin infection caused by a virus. You'll only need the vaccine once. You're eligible for a free shingles vaccine if you're 70 or 78. In addition, anyone who was eligible for the vaccine in the first three years of the programme but missed out remains eligible until their 80th birthday. This includes people in their 70s born after 1 September 1942, and people aged 79.

- Pneumococcal vaccine

If you're over 65, you can have a one-off jab to help protect you against pneumococcal infections which can cause serious illnesses like pneumonia, septicaemia (blood poisoning) or meningitis. You may also be eligible if you have a long-term health condition. It's also known as the 'pneumo jab' and you can book an appointment to get the vaccine at your local surgery.

## **Screening for both men and women**

- Bowel cancer

Everyone aged 60 to 74 should be automatically invited for bowel cancer screening every two years. If you're over 75, you can ask for a self-test kit by calling the freephone helpline ([0800 707 6060](tel:08007076060)).

- Eye screening for diabetics

Annual eye screening is offered to anyone with type 1 or type 2 diabetes. Your GP surgery will write to you, but the screening could take place somewhere else (for example, an opticians or eye hospital).

## **Screening for women**

- Breast cancer

All women aged 50 to 70 years are offered breast cancer screening every three years. If you're over 70, you can still be screened but you'll need to speak to your GP or contact your local screening service yourself.

- Cervical cancer

Screening for cervical cancer is often called a smear test. Women over 65 are invited for screening only if they have had a previous abnormal test result that needs monitoring, or have not been screened since they were 50. Whatever your age, if you have never had a screening for cervical cancer before, you can ask your GP for one.

## **Screening for men**

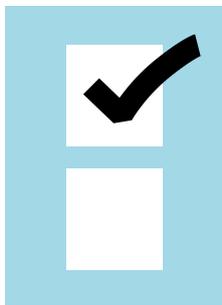
- Abdominal screening

All men turning 65 will be invited for abdominal screening. They are offered a scan to check whether they have an abdominal aortic aneurysm (a swelling of their main blood vessel that can lead to rupture). Men over 65 can ask their GP about screening or contact their local screening service.

- Prostate cancer screening

There is no national screening programme for prostate cancer, but there is an 'informed choice' programme. This means you should talk to your GP if you are worried about any symptoms you have or think you might be at higher risk of prostate cancer. Your GP may arrange for you to have a special blood test called a PSA test. This can detect the early signs of prostate cancer.

## To do



If you're not invited to take part in a national screening programme, it could be that your details need updating with your GP surgery, so do check.

## Financial help with health costs

People over 60 are entitled to free prescriptions and eye tests, but you can get extra help with the cost of healthcare services such as dental care or travel to hospital if you receive certain benefits or have a low income.

### To do



Read our factsheet **Help with health costs** for more information about how to get support from the NHS if you are on a low income.

## Help getting to medical appointments

If you don't drive and struggle to use public transport, you may find it difficult to get to and from your medical appointments.

You may be eligible for Patient Transport Services (PTS) if they're available in your area. PTS provide free transport to and from hospital for people who need medical support during their journey, find it difficult to walk, or are parents or guardians of children being transported. Ask your GP or the healthcare professional who referred you to hospital to find out more.

Schemes such as Dial-a-ride can provide door-to-door transport for older or disabled people. There may be taxis or community buses in your area that can transport people with disabilities. Contact your local council or Community Transport Online ([0161 351 1475](http://01613511475), [ctonline.org.uk](http://ctonline.org.uk)) to find out what's available locally.

In some areas, there are charity schemes that arrange transport by trained volunteers who have had security checks. Contact the Royal Voluntary Service ([0845 608 0122](tel:08456080122), [royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk](http://royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk)), or British Red Cross ([0344 871 1111](tel:03448711111), [redcross.org.uk](http://redcross.org.uk)) to see if there's a scheme in your area.

If you find it difficult to pay for the costs of travel to hospital for treatment, you may qualify for help from the Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme.

## To do



For more information about the Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme, call [0300 330 1343](tel:03003301343) or visit

[nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcosts/Pages/help-with-health-costs.aspx](http://nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcosts/Pages/help-with-health-costs.aspx)

## Having your say

Giving feedback on health services is really useful, whether you have had a good or bad experience. Telling the service what you thought and making suggestions for improvement can help them to understand what they are doing well and what needs to change so mistakes are not repeated.

## Giving feedback

Many NHS services (such as hospital wards, A&E departments and GP surgeries) carry out the Friends and Family Test. It asks how likely you are to recommend the service to friends and family if they need similar care or treatment. All

the results are published on the NHS Choices website ([nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)).

You can give more detailed feedback by talking to the manager. If your feedback is on hospital care, you can contact the hospital's Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). PALS offers confidential advice, support and information on health-related matters.

## **Making a complaint**

Although most care is of a high standard, unfortunately sometimes things go wrong. You have the right to make a complaint about any NHS treatment or service you have received - or should have received.

If you're unhappy with any NHS service, it's important to let someone know. Feedback can help change services for the better and prevent others having similar experiences.

Start by trying to resolve your problem informally by talking to the department or practice manager.

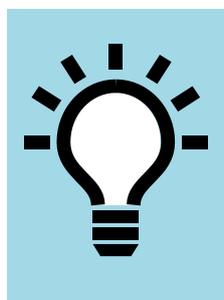
If an informal discussion doesn't work, ask for a copy of the complaints procedure. You should make your formal complaint within 12 months of the event that you're complaining about - or since you discovered there was a problem.

Your complaint should be acknowledged within three working days and it should be properly investigated. You may be invited to a meeting to discuss your concerns.

For more information about making a complaint and what to do if you are not happy with the way

a complaint is handled, read our factsheet  
**Complaints about care and health services.**

## Good to know



If you're worried about how a service is being run, you can contact the Care Quality Commission. The CQC doesn't deal with individual complaints, but it carries out inspections to make sure that health services meet quality and safety standards ([03000 616161](tel:03000616161), [cqc.org.uk](http://cqc.org.uk)).

## Other ways to have your say

There are many ways to influence the health services in your area:

- Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) are run by GP surgeries so that patients can suggest improvements they could make, and get involved in decisions about the services they offer. Ask at your GP surgery.
- Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) decide which services are available in local areas, and they may have a panel of patients who give feedback on key decisions or hold engagement events. You can use the NHS Service Search ([nhs.uk/Service-Search](http://nhs.uk/Service-Search)) to find contact details for your local CCG.
- Healthwatch is the champion for people who use health and care services. Local branches across the country gather people's views on the health and social care they've received. They then share what they find with local services and the national body Healthwatch

England. Contact Healthwatch England (03000 683 000, [healthwatch.co.uk](http://healthwatch.co.uk)) for more information and to find your local branch.

## 2. Managing at home

### **An assessment of your needs**

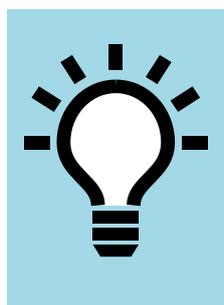
If you need help with daily living tasks at home, contact your local council's adult social services department and ask for a free care needs assessment. This will look at how you manage every day activities like cooking, carrying out household tasks and also washing and dressing. It will consider whether you would benefit from care and support, including aids or home adaptations. Social services must give you a written record of your assessment, so ask if you don't get one.

If your assessment decides your care needs meet the national eligibility criteria, you'll usually be given a financial assessment to decide how much you should contribute towards the cost of your support. The council may make a financial contribution to your care if your income and savings are below a certain level. Read our factsheet **First steps in getting help with your care needs** to find out more.

Even if you do not meet the eligibility criteria, the needs assessment will still identify your needs and help you to decide which support might be suitable for you.

Our guide **Getting help at home** gives details of the types of support which may be available to help you locally.

## Good to know



In some cases, if you have a high level of physical or mental health and care needs, the NHS may pay for your social care. You can talk to your social worker or GP about arranging an NHS Continuing Healthcare assessment.

Read our factsheet [Continuing Healthcare – should the NHS be paying for your care?](#) for more information.

## Help for carers

If a friend or family member helps to care for you, they are entitled to an assessment of their needs as a carer. This is known as a carer's assessment. The assessment might result in services to support them in their role as a carer, or more services to help you. Your carer should contact adult social services to arrange a free assessment. The contact details for social services will be on the council's website or in your local telephone directory.

For more information about carer's assessments, see our guide **Caring for someone** and factsheet **Getting help from the council as a carer**.

## Adaptations and specialist equipment

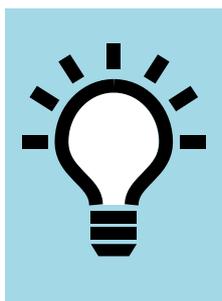
Specialised equipment or home adaptations can make it easier for you to carry out daily tasks or move about.

An occupational therapist may assess you to see what could help. An occupational therapist works with people who are ill, have health problems or have a disability. They will look at what day to day tasks you can do and what you have difficulty with. Based on the assessment, they can recommend aids, equipment or home adaptations that can make these tasks easier and safer. Suitable adaptations or aids could include:

- grab rails next to the bath, toilet, stairs or front door
- a community alarm system so you can call for help in an emergency
- specially designed or adapted furniture
- a stairlift
- ramps
- a walk-in shower.

Equipment and minor adaptations (that cost less than £1,000 to make) must be provided free by your council if you're assessed as needing it. If you need more substantial home adaptations, you may still be eligible for financial help like a grant or loan from your council.

## **Good to know**



If you have a disability and an occupational therapist has recommended a home adaptation, you may be able to get a Disabled Facilities Grant. The grant is means-tested and,

if you're eligible, you can get up to £30,000.

A Home Improvement Agency (HIA) can help older or disabled people arrange, find funding for and carry out home repairs, improvements and adaptations.

Find out if there is a HIA in your area by contacting the national charity Foundations ([0300 124 0315](tel:03001240315), [foundations.uk.com](http://foundations.uk.com)). If there isn't one, ask your local council or advice centre about what help is available.

For more information about getting specialist equipment, see our factsheet **Choosing disability equipment**.

For more information about Disabled Facilities Grants and adapting your home, see our factsheet **Adapting your home to stay independent**.

## **Mobility equipment**

If you have difficulty walking, you may benefit from a walking stick, a walker, wheelchair (either manual or automatic) or mobility scooter. A wide range of equipment is available, so speak to an occupational therapist or physiotherapist and look into the different options carefully. For more information about getting specialist equipment, see our factsheet **Choosing disability equipment**.

## **Avoiding falls**

Many of us worry about falling. A fall can cause serious injury and affect your confidence.

However, many falls can be prevented by taking simple measures.

- Take regular exercise – such as walking, swimming or gardening – to keep your muscles strong and improve your balance. Your GP may be able to recommend strength and balance exercises or local exercise classes.
- Ask your GP or pharmacist for an annual medication review. The side-effects of some medication might increase your chance of having a fall. Let your GP know if a medicine is making you feel dizzy or unwell.
- Get your sight tested regularly
- Wear well-fitted shoes and avoid open-backed slippers or loose-fitting trousers that might cause you to trip
- Keep your home well-lit, clutter-free and use non-slip mats under any rugs. Repair frayed carpet edges
- Organise your house so you don't need to climb, stretch or bend too much. For example, store frequently used items in an accessible cupboard or fit a letterbox cage so you don't have to bend down to pick up post.

Read our guide **Home safety** to find out more about avoiding falls.

## To do



Consider getting a personal alarm. This is a pendant or wristband you wear with a button to press to call for help if you fall or feel unwell (see chapter four).

## Good to know



You may be asked whether you have had any falls when you have health check-ups or a hospital visit.

If a doctor, nurse or social care worker thinks that you are at risk of having a fall, they may refer you to a falls service or a professional who can assess your risk of falling and whether there is any extra help that could stop you from falling again.

## Extra help after a hospital stay

Intermediate care and reablement services are a free, short-term care package offered to some people to enable them to maintain or regain the ability to live independently at home.

They may:

- help someone recover from illness or an operation
- help people to stay out of hospital
- help people regain their independence or skills
- prevent or delay a move into a care home.

Intermediate care and reablement services can be provided at home, in hospital or in a care home. It may be provided by NHS staff or by social care professionals such as social workers or professional carers. If arranged by your local council, these services must be free and can be provided for up to six weeks.

Intermediate care and reablement services could cover a range of support, and what is available will depend on your local area. For example, visiting carers to support you to start washing, dressing, shopping, cooking and walking independently again. Equipment may be provided to help you move around your home or complete tasks more easily. You may also be visited by nurses and physiotherapists.

Intermediate care or reablement services aren't right for everyone. You will need to be referred to your local service by your hospital, social worker or GP. Before you start receiving the service you should have a meeting to agree what you'd like to achieve. You should be given a care plan which should be reviewed regularly, and at the end of the care package. If necessary, you may be offered on-going support. You may need to pay for this.

For more information, read our factsheet **Hospital stays**.

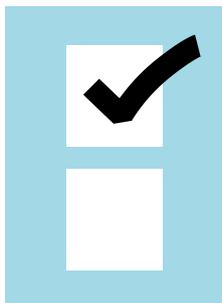
## 3. Looking after yourself

### Understanding your condition

It may help to have a good understanding of your health conditions. A good source of information is the NHS itself. The NHS Choices website has information on conditions, treatments and local services ([nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)) as well as a more balanced view on news reports on miracle cures (in the 'behind the headlines' section).

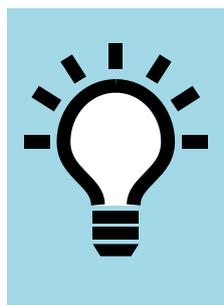
Your local NHS may also run free 'expert patient' courses for anybody living with a long-term condition and for people who are caring for someone else. These courses can help you to understand and manage your condition with help from healthcare professionals. Speak to your GP or pharmacist about what might be available in your area.

#### To do



Contacting a local or national support group with people who have the same condition can also be helpful. You can pick up tips and benefit from their advice. Ask your GP if they know of a group, or look on the NHS Choices website ([nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)).

## Good to know



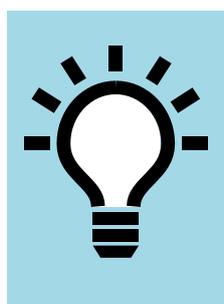
If you want to learn more about the treatment or care that's been recommended for you, you can get more information from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) ([0300 323 0140](tel:03003230140), [nice.org.uk](http://nice.org.uk)).

## Managing your medication

Make sure you take any medication as prescribed. If you are asked to do something every day, like monitor your blood pressure or level of pain, try to do this as asked. If for any reason you fail to follow your doctor's advice or take your medication, it's better to admit it. Being honest will mean that you'll help your doctor work out the best way to treat you.

Your medication will come with a leaflet explaining how to take it and any side effects to watch out for. If you're concerned about anything you read, speak to your GP or pharmacist. It may be that the risks in the leaflet don't apply to you.

## Good to know



A pharmacist can assess all the medicines you are taking and check your understanding of each one and how you are taking it. If necessary, the pharmacist can also contact your GP and recommend a change.

## **Monitoring your health**

If you have a long-term condition like diabetes, arthritis or heart disease, you could help your doctor by keeping a diary describing how the problem is affecting you every day. This needn't be anything too complicated, you can just note particular symptoms or how you're feeling over a week or month.

## **Telehealth technology**

Telehealth is a way of sharing information with your doctor from your home. Telehealth equipment can be used to monitor your temperature or blood pressure for example, and the data automatically sent to your doctor to review. This technology is particularly useful for people with long term health conditions, including some heart conditions, diabetes and epilepsy.

Using telehealth equipment could help you to feel more in control of your health condition, all the while knowing that your doctor is able to regularly check on your wellbeing. Talk to your GP if you think this could be useful to you.

For more information, see our factsheet **Technology to help you at home.**

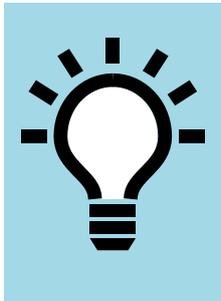
## **Pain management**

If you have a painful long-term health condition such as arthritis, there are things you can do to help you cope, such as gentle exercise, using relaxation techniques, and talking about your experience of pain with others in a similar

situation. The Pain Toolkit ([paintoolkit.org](http://paintoolkit.org)) is full of information about how to manage your own pain.

If you have severe or chronic pain which is affecting your quality of life, you could ask your GP to refer you to a hospital pain clinic. Your GP may also be able to refer you to a pain management programme, where small groups are taught techniques to help them cope with living with pain.

## Good to know



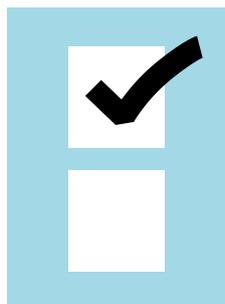
Action on Pain is a national charity for people living with pain, which can put you in touch with local support groups ([0345 603 1593](tel:03456031593), [action-on-pain.co.uk](http://action-on-pain.co.uk)). Their helpline is run by people living with chronic pain and is open 10am-4pm, Monday to Friday.

## Looking after your mental health

Having physical health problems can take its toll on your mental health. It can be hard to feel happy and positive if you are feeling unwell and find it difficult to live your life as you would wish. That's why it's important to be aware of how you are feeling and watch out for signs of depression.

If you think that you might be depressed, speak to your GP. They can suggest treatments and support, which don't always have to include medication.

### To do



Read our guide **Dealing with depression** for tips on how to recognise the signs of depression, and action you can take.

## 4. Planning for the future

### Being prepared for emergencies

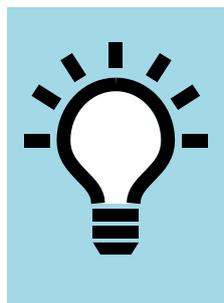
It's important to think about how to make sure you get the help you need in an emergency, especially if you live alone.

Medical tags and jewellery carry details of who you are, your medical condition(s) and emergency contact details. You can have this information recorded on a pendant or bracelet, or on a card that you can keep in a handbag or pocket. They are available from a number of retailers. Ask your GP if there's one they recommend.

They can be useful if you:

- have a hidden medical condition (eg diabetes, epilepsy or a heart condition)
- have a serious allergy
- have had an implant
- take regular medication
- have an Advance Decision (see below)
- want someone else to know if you have been involved in an emergency.

## Good to know



Some charities, such as the Stroke Association, can provide stickers or cards that display your next-of-kin contact details and explain your condition.

## When you're at home

There is an increasing range of technology that can help you live independently and safely at home. For example, a personal alarm is a way to call for help if you fall or become unwell and are unable to get to the phone. You can press a button on a pendant or wrist alarm to alert a call centre - they will send out a friend or relative or contact the emergency services for you.

## Letting others make health decisions on your behalf

Where your health is concerned, it's never too soon to plan ahead for the future. Right now you may be able to be fully involved in discussions and decisions about your health and care, but what happens if you are unable to in the future?

It's important to think about who you want to make decisions about your finances, health and care if you ever lose the mental capacity to make such decisions for yourself.

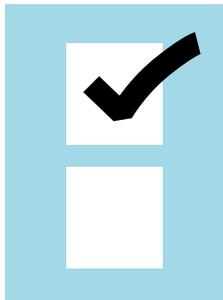
## Lasting Power of Attorney

A Lasting Power of Attorney is a legal document that allows you to appoint someone you trust to make decisions on your behalf.

There are two types - one covering health and welfare and the other dealing with property and financial affairs. You can choose to make one type or both.

You don't have to go through a solicitor to appoint someone but you do need to complete a form, sign it and register it with the Office of the Public Guardian.

### To do



You can get the forms from the Office of the Public Guardian, or apply online ([0300 456 0300](tel:03004560300), [gov.uk/power-of-attorney/make-lasting-power](https://gov.uk/power-of-attorney/make-lasting-power)).

## Deputyship

If you don't arrange a Lasting Power of Attorney and you lose capacity to manage your affairs, the Court of Protection can appoint a deputy to look after your interests. Anyone can apply to be a deputy, but the Court decides who to appoint. A deputyship is more expensive and there is an annual fee to pay. Find out more at [gov.uk/become-deputy](https://gov.uk/become-deputy)

## Advance decisions

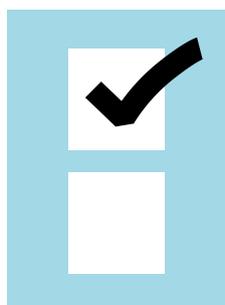
If there are some types of treatments that you know you would not want to receive in the future, you could consider making an advance decision.

Through an advance decision you can state what life-sustaining treatments you do not want to receive in the future, if you cannot make the decision for yourself. You have to be specific about the circumstances in which you don't want a certain treatment, for example when you wouldn't want to be resuscitated. If set up correctly, it is a legally binding document, which means it must be followed by medical staff. Make sure you talk to any family members and your GP about your wishes.

Your advance decision must be written down and signed by you, as well as by a witness. You could consider keeping your advance decision with your medical records so that health professionals know about it and know where to find it.

See our guide **Planning for the end of life** and our factsheet **Managing my affairs if I become ill** for more information.

### To do



Contact Compassion in Dying if you would like help in setting up an advance decision ([0800 999 2434](tel:08009992434), [compassionindying.org.uk](http://compassionindying.org.uk)).

## 5. Useful contacts



If you want to discuss anything you have read in this factsheet, you can contact our advice team (0800 319 6789, [advice@independentage.org](mailto:advice@independentage.org)).

- Alzheimer's Society (0300 222 1122, [alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk))
- Arthritis Care (0808 800 4050, [arthritiscare.org.uk](http://arthritiscare.org.uk))
- Bladder and Bowel Community (01926 357220, [bladderandbowel.org](http://bladderandbowel.org))
- Compassion in Dying (0800 999 2434, [compassionindying.org.uk](http://compassionindying.org.uk))
- Dementia UK (0800 888 6678, [dementiauk.org](http://dementiauk.org))
- Diabetes UK (0345 123 2399, [diabetes.org.uk](http://diabetes.org.uk))
- Macmillan Cancer Support (0808 808 00 00, [macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk))
- Parkinson's UK (0808 800 0303, [parkinsons.org.uk](http://parkinsons.org.uk))
- Stroke Association (0303 3033 100, [stroke.org.uk](http://stroke.org.uk))

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Independent Age would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this information was being developed, and those who reviewed the information for us.

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