

DENTISTRY – A GUIDE TO YOUR RIGHTS AND ACCESSING THE TREATMENT YOU NEED

What is included in this guide?

This Healthwatch guide provides you with information about seeing a dentist through the NHS, or privately.

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Who has written this guide?

This guide has been produced by local Healthwatch teams from [Brighton and Hove](#), [East Sussex](#) and [West Sussex](#) based on dental issues affecting Sussex residents. Healthwatch worked with local dentists to write this guide.

Who is Healthwatch?

Healthwatch is your independent health and social care champion. We make sure that those running services put you at the heart of care. We listen to what you like about services and what you think needs to be improved and feed this back to those in charge. We provide you with information about services.

PART ONE

Changes announced in July 2022 to improve access to dental services

On 19th July, NHS England [announced changes](#) to the NHS dental contract – the first in 16 years. These came into effect in November 2022. The changes are designed to make it easier for people to see which dentists are taking on NHS patients. Those with more complex dental problems should also have better access to care. It is hoped that these measures will reduce long waiting times. The changes are a first step to improve dental services and will mean that:

- Dental therapists will be able to accept patients for NHS treatments, providing fillings, sealants, preventative care for adults and children, which will free up dentists' time for urgent and complex cases.
- Dentists are now required to update the [NHS website and directory of services](#) so patients can more easily find the availability of NHS dentists in their local area.
- High-performing dental practices will have the opportunity to increase their NHS activity by a further 10% and to see as many patients as possible.

What is the dental contract? The contract sets out what NHS treatments dentists can provide and how much they get paid for doing this. The stories people have shared with Healthwatch have highlighted the difficulties they have in getting a dental appointment. In part, this highlights the limitations of the current NHS dental contract. That is why the above changes – and further changes – are needed.

PART TWO

The difference between NHS and private dental treatment

What you need to know

High street dentists are private businesses that work for the NHS to provide dental care for patients. Strict criteria govern what and how many NHS treatments dentists can provide.

NHS dental care is subsidised by the government. This means that some of the cost of looking after your teeth has already been paid for. Unless you are exempt, you will need to pay for most NHS treatment (for more information on costs see [Part 6](#)).

The NHS can pay towards your treatment if a dentist says that you have a clinical "need" and the dentist has the capacity to provide the treatment should under their NHS contract. If they do not have the capacity, they may offer to treat you privately.

NHS dental treatment looks after the health of your teeth but does not cover cosmetic treatments. Private treatment looks after the health of your teeth and also cosmetic treatments. You must fully cover the costs of each private treatment received. Sometimes finance plans or dental insurance are available to help.

Your dentist must explain what treatment you need and how much of the cost will be met through the NHS or privately by you. You should always confirm what these costs are before starting treatment and whether it is provided through the NHS.

What treatment is available on the NHS?

The NHS website provides information about the different dental treatments that are available through the NHS and what they involve. Please click this [link](#) to learn more. Treatments that a dentist can provide through the NHS includes crowns, bridges, dentures, treatment for gum infections, root canal treatment, fillings and scale and polish.

NHS dental treatment does not cover treatments such as teeth whitening, implants and other cosmetic treatments which are not clinically necessary. You may choose to have this dental work done and pay privately for it.

What is private dental treatment?

If you receive private treatment, you must cover the cost of each treatment. Dentists may offer to provide some treatments privately rather than through the NHS (e.g. some types of crowns or bridges, or white fillings). This may be to give you more choice, or so you receive your treatment faster. You should always check whether the treatment is being offered privately or on the NHS and the cost before proceeding.

Treatment plans

Your dentist should provide you with a treatment plan, identifying any treatment that is needed and a breakdown of the [NHS costs](#) or private costs (see [Part 6](#) for more details about costs of NHS dental treatment).

Hospital dental services

Certain NHS dental procedures are only available in hospital. This includes referrals to hospital-based Oral and Maxillofacial, Restorative, and Orthodontic services.

Emergency treatment

You should only visit Emergency Departments (A&E) in serious circumstances. Before going to A&E you should call NHS '111'. This is a free phone number and they will be able to advise whether you need to visit A&E or whether other health services or treatments can help. Conditions which may require emergency treatment are:

- When you are in severe pain that a dentist is unable to help you with.
- If you are experiencing heavy bleeding.
- If you have severe facial or oral swelling.
- If you have injuries to the face, mouth, or teeth.

PART THREE

Registering with a dentist

What you need to know

You do not need to formally register with a dentist in the same way as with a GP.

You can attend any dentist (even if the practice is based in a different area to where you live) as long as they have the capacity to see you.

Registering for a course of treatment does not necessarily mean that you are permanently registered with the same dental practice.

The way you register with a dental practice is different to registering with a GP. Whilst GPs will only see people who live within a certain distance to the practice (known as a catchment area), dentists do not operate in this way.

You can contact any dental practice that is convenient for you to see if they have any NHS appointments available.

The NHS has a website that lets you [search for an NHS dentist near you](#) by entering your town, city, or postcode. This should help identify dentists offering NHS treatment but not their availability, so you must contact practices directly to enquire. The [changes to the NHS dental contract](#) which were announced in July 2022 and came into effect in November 2023 should make this website more reliable, but this will take time.

Once you find a dental practice

You will be asked to fill in a new patient form at your first visit. This records your information so you can be seen and receive a particular course of treatment.

Many practices keep a database of patients that they have seen. They will often use this list to invite patients back for routine check-ups and to manage their practice list and capacity. Having a regular relationship with the same practice can aid the provision of your treatment.

Waiting lists

Dental practices will not always have the capacity to take on new NHS patients. Many practices will prioritise seeing those patients who are already on their database. You may, therefore, be asked to join a waiting list to be seen.

If you would prefer not to wait, you can look for a different dentist who is taking on new NHS patients, ask to be seen privately, or call [NHS 111](#) if it is an emergency.

If your preferred dental practice is not operating a waiting list, you can ask them to suggest how long to wait before getting in touch again.

Being seen in the future

Being seen or treated by a dental practice in the past may not mean you will have guaranteed access to see the same dentist in the future. You may need to contact another practice for your future needs. If you are unsure, check with your preferred practice whether they will be able to see you in the future.

PART FOUR

Routine check-ups

What you need to know

Dentists prioritise who they see, so unless you have an urgent need ([see Part 5](#)) you may find it difficult to get a non-urgent NHS appointment, such as a routine check-up.

Average waiting times for routine check-ups can be up to six months.

If your teeth and gums are healthy, you may not need a routine check-up for up to 24 months. The dentist will advise you on how often you need a check-up. They should also advise you how often you should have a check-up in order to continue to be seen as an NHS patient.

If you do not make or attend NHS appointments with the frequency specified by the dentist your dental health may be at risk. You may also be removed from the patient database of that practice.

The NHS provides [advice](#) on how to maintain healthy teeth and gums.

PART FIVE

How to explain your dental need

What you need to know

It is important to clearly explain what your need is when contacting a dental practice. Dental practices determine the urgency of your treatment by taking a detailed history of your symptoms. This helps them get an idea of the diagnosis which will then help them decide how quickly you need to be seen.

You should explain if your dental need is linked to other health problems.

If you require urgent or emergency support, ask if the practice can see you for urgent treatment through the NHS. If that is not possible you may be offered a private appointment. Having private treatment does not mean that you cannot return to NHS treatment in the future, and this may even be possible with the same dentist.

You may find some relief using remedies at home whilst you wait for treatment.

What to do if you have a dental concern

When contacting a dentist, the staff will assess ('triage') your request. You may be offered a phone call with a dentist if they cannot see you in person or if your need is not urgent. It is important to clearly explain what your need is and what impact it is having, e.g. if you are in pain, experiencing difficulties eating or sleeping, or have any facial swelling. This will help them to assess whether you need to be seen in person or if it can be treated or supported with advice, pain relief or antibiotics.

If you have a non-urgent need or cannot access a dentist immediately

You may find relief using over the counter remedies such as painkillers or analgesic gel for mild pain, medicated mouthwashes for bleeding gums, and desensitising toothpastes for toothache. Temporary fillings can also be purchased from pharmacies and supermarkets.

A guide to Home Care is available by [clicking here](#). A high-street pharmacist may also be able to offer you advice.

If you require urgent or emergency medical help.

Who to contact and when?

1. Contact the dental practice you usually visit.
2. If you do not have a regular dentist or they cannot see you, contact any dental practice. You can use the [NHS website](#) to help find a practice near you (see [Part 3](#)). Or call **0300 123 1663**.
3. If you are unable to contact or see a dentist and you believe it is urgent, call [NHS 111](#).
4. If you think you need to visit A&E, phone [NHS 111](#) first to get advice. Only visit Emergency Departments (A&E) in serious circumstances, such as:
 - When you are in severe pain that a dentist is unable to help you with.
 - If you are experiencing heavy bleeding.
 - If you have severe facial or oral swelling.
 - If you have injuries to the face, mouth, or teeth.

How to explain your urgent dental need

When you speak to a dentist or receptionist you should explain why you have an urgent dental need. The dentist needs information to understand how best to help you. Tell them:

- What impact your dental problem is having e.g. difficulties eating, difficulties swallowing, swelling in your face, difficulty opening your mouth, severe blood loss and any effects on your day-to-day life.

- If you have a history of poor dental health that has required treatment in the past, especially if your current problem is linked to it, or if you have an ongoing or long-term dental condition.
- If you are at a higher risk of oral disease. For example, smoking increases the risk of gum disease, can affect your response to treatment and can increase the chance of losing your teeth. So, do say if you are a heavy smoker.
- If you have a health condition which places you at higher risk of illness such as diabetes or are receiving any medical treatment that may impact your teeth or gums.
- If you (or the person you are calling about) has special needs.
- If the person you are calling about is a child. Dental practices have been told to prioritise children for a dental appointment.
- If you are pregnant as this may change the tests and treatments you are offered.
- If you have an incomplete dental care plan or are waiting for a review following previous dental treatment.

You also need to tell the dentist or receptionist if you are in a vulnerable patient group. This includes people who are homeless, travellers, migrants or refugees and looked after children.

Part Six

NHS dental charges, what you might be asked to pay, and exemptions

What you need to know

Before starting your treatment remember to ask questions:

- *“Is this NHS or private treatment?”*
- *“What is the cost of my treatment, and how much of my treatment will be met by the NHS?”*

Ask for a treatment plan which explains what treatment you are having and the costs involved. You should sign this.

Dental practices have different procedures. Following an assessment of your treatment needs, some dental practices may ask for the whole payment for your treatment up front, some will ask you to pay after it has all been completed and others may ask you to pay in stages. Check with your surgery when you go for your initial check-up.

If you need further treatment, in some cases you will not need to pay again within two months of your initial treatment. And some treatments are guaranteed for 12 months.

Some people are eligible for free NHS treatment, and financial support is available for others.

Your dentist must explain which of the treatments they are recommending can be provided by the NHS and which can only be provided privately. They must also tell you the cost. If you are unsure, ask the dentist to explain why the treatment options are being recommended.

If a proposed treatment is available via the NHS, then you should be offered it at the appropriate price band.

If you decide to choose private options, this should be included in your treatment plan.

You should only be charged for private dental treatment if you agreed to have private dental treatment.

Your treatment plan

NHS treatments are provided under one of three [Bands](#) (see below). Your dentist should provide you with a [written treatment plan](#) for Band 2 and Band 3 NHS treatments (or a mix of these) and private treatments. Treatment plans are not usually given for [Band 1](#) or urgent dental treatment, but you can ask for one.

Regardless of the treatment you have, you should understand what dental treatment has been suggested and how much it will cost.

You will be asked to sign your treatment plan and be given a copy to keep. If you are not given a copy, make sure you ask for one.

NHS costs

At your first appointment, you will usually be asked to pay for your assessment. You should only pay for any treatment once you have received this.

The costs of NHS treatment vary depending on the treatment you require, and there are three NHS charging bands (excluding urgent only treatment) and as of April 2023 these are:

- **Band 1 – £25.80** for examinations, diagnosis, and advice, [X-rays](#), a scale and polish, and planning for further treatment.
- **Band 2 – £70.70** for all treatment included in Band 1, plus additional treatment, such as fillings, [root canal treatment](#) and removing teeth (extractions).
- **Band 3 – £306.80** for all treatment included in Bands 1 and 2, plus more complex procedures, such as crowns, dentures, and bridges.

To check the costs of treatment and whether you are eligible for free treatment, or support with paying, visit the [NHS website](#).

Who can get free dental care?

You do not have to pay for NHS dental treatment if, when the treatment starts, you are:

- Aged under 18.
- Under 19 and in full-time education.
- Pregnant/have had a baby in the previous 12 months.
- Staying in an NHS hospital and your treatment is carried out by the hospital dentist.
- An NHS hospital dental service outpatient (you may have to pay for dentures or bridges).

You do not have to pay if, during the course of treatment, you/your partner, receive:

- Income Support.
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance.
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance.
- Pension Credit Guarantee Credit.
- Universal Credit.

Or

- You are named on a valid NHS tax credit exemption certificate, or you are entitled to an NHS tax credit exemption certificate.
- You are named on a valid HC2 certificate. To get a HC2 certificate, you must apply for the HC1 Low Income Scheme at the NHS. You will find everything you need to know about [the HC1 application form here](#).

Make sure you are clear about exemptions before having treatment

If in doubt, ask your dentist. If you are unsure, it may be better to pay for your treatment and then claim a refund if you can later prove that you were exempt. You should use the HC5(D) form to claim a refund. This way, you will avoid a £100 penalty charge on top of the cost of the treatment for a mistaken claim. For more information visit the [NHS website](#) or call 0300 330 13 43.

If you need further treatment

If, within 2 calendar months of completing a course of NHS treatment, you need more treatment from the same or lower NHS Band (see above), such as another filling, you do not have to pay anything extra. This does not include urgent only treatment or support.

If the additional treatment needed is in a higher NHS Band you will have to pay for the new NHS course of treatment.

After two months, you will have to pay the NHS charge band if you need more treatment.

Treatment 'guarantees'

Certain NHS treatments are guaranteed for 12 months from the date they were completed. This applies only if a like for like replacement is possible. If alternative treatment is required there may be additional charges.

The treatments which are covered by the guarantee are:

- Fillings.
- Root fillings.
- Inlays.
- Porcelain veneers.
- Crowns.

NHS Treatments you do not pay for

You do not have to pay for some NHS treatments, including:

- Denture repairs.
- To have stitches removed.
- If your dentist has to stop blood loss.
- If a prescription is the only treatment provided and you are exempt from paying for your prescriptions.

If you think your dental charges are wrong, you should talk to your dentist or the person at your dental practice responsible for patient feedback. You can also make a complaint.

Part Seven

How to make a complaint

What you need to know

You have the right to raise a concern or complaint if you are not happy with any aspect of your treatment.

Your first step is to make a complaint directly with the dental practice.

If you are not happy with the response you get, you can complain to NHS England.

You should also register your concern if you are unable to book an NHS dental appointment.

Complaining about your treatment

You can make a complaint directly with the dental practice - ideally using their complaints process or policy. It is best to do this in writing or by email so that you will receive a written reply.

If you would rather not deal with the practice, you can contact NHS England (see details below) who are responsible for commissioning (buying) NHS dental services.

Remember to explain what happened and when, and what outcome you would like.

If you are not happy with the response you get:

- For NHS treatment, [contact your local Healthwatch](#) to find out who provides Independent Health Complaints Advocacy in your local area.
- You can contact NHS England (see below) who are responsible for commissioning (buying) NHS dental services.
- For Private treatment, you can contact the [Dental Complaints Service \(DCS\)](#).

If you are unable to find a local dentist who can see you, and NHS England has been unable to help you find a dentist, you should raise your concerns by contacting them on:

- email: england.contactus@nhs.net
- phone: 0300 311 2233
- visit the [NHS England website](#)

If you are not satisfied with NHS England's response, you can take your complaint to the [Parliamentary Health Service Ombudsman](#).

Part Eight

Other useful links and emergency dentist contact detail

Sussex NHS Dental Helpline

Call the Helpline for details of dentists in Sussex (including Brighton & Hove) accepting NHS patients for routine and urgent treatment.

Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm, 03001 231663

Emergency Dental Service (Brighton & Hove)

This is an evening / weekend service for anyone with dental pain.

Please phone 03000 242548, Monday to Friday 5:30–10:30pm, or Saturday, Sunday and Bank Holidays 9am to 5.30pm.

This service is delivered by [idental care limited](#).

Emergency Dental Service (East Sussex)

The [East Sussex Emergency NHS Dental Service](#) can only treat patients who have an urgent care need that meets the strict triage criteria around clinical symptoms. Please note this is not a drop in service – an appointment must be made prior to attendance.

Weekday out-of-hours emergencies:

Please phone (Eastbourne) 01323 449170 or (Hastings) 01424 850792 between 6.30pm to 10.30pm, with appointments between 7.00pm to 9.00pm.

Weekends and Bank Holidays

The numbers above can be used at weekends and on bank holidays.

Opening hours at weekends and Bank Holidays are as follows:

- Eastbourne – 1pm to 5.30pm with appointments between 2pm to 4pm
- Hastings and Lewes – 9am to 1.30pm with appointments between 10am to 12pm

Emergency Dental Service (West Sussex)

The Emergency Dental Service is an appointment only service, walk-ins cannot be accepted.

Please look at the Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust website (link below) as this will give details of the four locations across West Sussex providing emergency dental care:

<https://www.sussexcommunity.nhs.uk/services/emergency-dental-service/108955>

Further information:

NHS – [Easyread guide – What your dentist can do for you](#)

NHS – [Dental services](#)

Part Nine

How to contact your local Healthwatch

If you have any questions or comments about dentistry in your area or would like to find out about the work of, please contact your local team:



Email: office@healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk

Phone: 01273 234040

Website: www.healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk



Email: enquiries@healthwatcheastssussex.co.uk

Phone: 0333 101 4007

Website: www.healthwatcheastssussex.co.uk



Email: helpdesk@healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk

Phone: 0300 012 0122

Website: www.healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk

ANNEX

How did COVID-19 affect NHS dental services

What you need to know

NHS dentistry was significantly affected by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), resulting in fewer available appointments.

NHS dental services are now open for business, but it is not yet 'Business as Usual'. Dentists are still prioritising patients according to clinical need.

You may wait longer for routine, non-urgent treatments on the NHS.

The impact of COVID-19

In the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic:

- NHS England required dentists to shut meaning that face to face appointments were not possible.
- Dentists switched to providing advice and NHS treatments, such as prescriptions for antibiotics, by telephone.
- Hospitals remained open but only saw patients with an urgent clinical need.

Restricting the number of face-to-face appointments and treatments was intended to help reduce the spread of the virus and protect staff and patients.

The availability of dental appointments was also affected by dental practices needing to follow stricter hygiene procedures. This included deep cleaning treatment rooms between patients which could take up to 45 minutes each time.

COVID-19 also affected NHS hospital dental services who experienced higher demand and longer waiting times.

The current situation

Dentists resumed face to face consultations in June 2020 but services have had to work through large backlogs of cases that built up during the lockdowns.

Dental practices have told Healthwatch that they still have less capacity to take on new patients for NHS treatment unless it is for urgent care (see [Part 5](#)). Waiting lists for non-urgent routine check-ups can still be as long as 6 months.

The impact of COVID-19 and the restrictions that dentists were placed under has led some dentists to stop offering NHS treatment altogether, meaning that they now only offer private treatments. We are also aware that a number of dentists have decided to retire early, and recruitment issues are limiting the number of NHS dentists.

The [changes to the NHS dental contract](#) which were announced in July 2022 should start to improve access for patients, but this may take time.