

GPs and primary care

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This factsheet highlights the contribution which general practice doctors (usually called GPs or family doctors), and other NHS services termed 'primary care services' can make to the care of people with HIV.

Even though people with HIV receive their HIV care from specialist HIV clinics, it is still important to have a GP. Firstly, many GPs offer services which are not available at your HIV clinic, but which you may need from time to time, such as health visiting for women who have recently had a baby; community nurses, if you need nursing support at home; mental health nursing; physiotherapy; and chiropody.

GPs are able to provide prescriptions for non-HIV medicines which your clinic may be unable to supply for more than a couple of weeks. Also, GPs are the only doctors who can make home visits if you are too ill to attend your HIV clinic or your GP's surgery. If you are unwell outside normal working hours, or at the weekend or bank holidays, all GPs have an emergency service, whereby a nurse or doctor will offer advice and, if necessary, visit you at home. If the problem requires hospital care, they can arrange for your admission into hospital and will normally be willing to speak to the on-call HIV doctor at your clinic to arrange specialist HIV care if appropriate.

Registering with a GP

To get access to a GP you must be registered as their patient. You can only be registered with one GP and you must live within the area the GP practises in. When you register you will be asked to give your name and address, your NHS number and details of your last GP. Don't worry if you can't find your NHS number, you can still register without it. A few weeks after you register with a GP you will receive a card confirming your registration, which will have your NHS number on it.

Some HIV clinics keep a list of GPs, and may be able to recommend a GP with experience of caring for people with HIV. However, GPs often find that they cannot accept any more patients as they have the maximum number of people registered with them which they are able to offer services to. You can also contact NHS Direct on 0845 4647 for details of all GP practices in your area. If you still have problems finding a GP who is able to register you, then contact your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service. GPs cannot refuse to register you because you have HIV or any other medical condition, or because of your race or sexuality.

If you need a GP when you are away from home, then you can register as a 'temporary resident' if you will be within their practice area for 14 days or less. (For more information on health care services for people who are non-UK nationals, see the *Access to health care* section on our website.)

If you are entitled to free NHS treatment then all NHS services provided by your GP will be free. GPs also provide some other services for a fee, such as signing passport applications.

Most GPs have an appointment system, and sometimes these become booked up days in advance. Emergency appointments will usually be available for people who *need* to be seen quickly. These are normally available the same day, but on a 'first come, first served' basis.

Disclosing your HIV status

You don't have to tell your GP that you have HIV. Some people are reluctant to tell their GP that they have HIV because they are worried about confidentiality.

But there are some reasons why it makes good sense to tell your GP that you have HIV. It will help them provide the most appropriate treatment and care. For example, if you are taking HIV treatment, it's important to consider potentially harmful interactions with other medications.

Knowing that you have HIV will enable your GP to look out for signs and symptoms of illnesses or side-effects.

If confidentiality is your concern, then it's good to know that your GP medical records are confidential, and nobody can see them except in very exceptional circumstances without your consent. If you are concerned about disclosing your status, explore whether staff at your HIV treatment centre, or an advocate, could help you assess your GP's practice around disclosure beforehand.

Some people have been worried about telling their GP that they have HIV because they worry about this information being disclosed to potential employers or providers of financial services.

If you are applying for life assurance or are asked to complete a health questionnaire before appointment to a new job, you will be asked to give contact details for your GP and consent to them being approached. If you don't disclose relevant information to an insurance company, the policy will be invalid.