

Visiting your HIV clinic for check-ups

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This factsheet provides information on what a typical visit to an HIV clinic might involve. But working practices differ between clinics so it is possible that your experiences will be different to the ones described here.

Before your appointment

It's a good idea to book an appointment a few weeks in advance if you are going to your clinic for a routine appointment. Think about any questions you would like to ask your doctor. Write these questions down to help you remember them.

HIV clinics are very busy, so if you cannot make your appointment it would be helpful and appreciated if you contacted your clinic as soon as possible to rebook another and to let them offer your original appointment to someone else.

Arrival at the clinic

Make every effort to get to your clinic on time. If you are late and miss your appointment you may have a long wait before the doctor can see you.

When you arrive, go straight to reception. Give them your name, clinic number if you know it, the time of your appointment and who you have come to see. They should make sure that the person you've come to see knows you are here and make a note of your arrival time.

If you have come to the clinic because of an emergency, or if you are there for an operation or certain tests (for example a fasting cholesterol test), then don't have anything to eat or drink whilst you are waiting.

Waiting times

Clinics should make every effort to make sure that you are seen at your appointment time. But delays often happen. You should be kept informed about any expected delays. If you have not been seen within 30 minutes of your appointment time, then return to reception and tell them. You are perfectly entitled to know the reason for the delay and how much longer you will kept waiting for. Try not to get angry and be polite.

Seeing your doctor

When your doctor is ready to see you, they will almost certainly call you by your name. If you are seeing a doctor for the first time, they should introduce themselves. Your doctor should ask for your agreement if a student or other healthcare professional wants to sit in on your consultation.

You should be asked how you are and if you have any concerns. The results of any tests that you have had should be given to you and your doctor should explain the meaning of your results.

If you have a physical examination your doctor should tell you why this is necessary. Your doctor should also tell you if you need any more tests and the reason for them.

If you are given any medicines your doctor should tell you why you need them, what they are, how to take them, and what side-effects you might experience.

It's perfectly fine for you to interrupt your doctor and ask questions if you do not understand what you are being told.

Your doctor may refer you to see another doctor or healthcare worker. The reason for this and what will happen next should be explained to you.

At the end of your appointment your doctor will ask you if you have any questions and will tell you when you next need to come and see them.

But you may have to see other people before you leave the clinic.

Blood tests

Regular blood tests are an essential part of your HIV care. Your doctor will complete forms during your appointment saying which blood tests you need. These tests will be performed by a nurse or a phlebotomist – somebody who takes blood. You may have another wait.

Pharmacy

Large HIV clinics have a specialist pharmacy where you should go with your prescription. They will have anti-HIV drugs and other medicines to treat illnesses that are seen in people with HIV.

At smaller clinics you will need to go to the hospital's outpatient pharmacy for all your drugs.

If you are taking HIV treatment you should be given enough to last until your next clinic appointment, unless you have an arrangement with your clinic to have your prescription delivered to you at home. Your HIV doctor may only be able to prescribe a maximum of two weeks of treatment with other drugs and you should go to your GP if you need further supplies.

The pharmacist will ask you if you are allergic to any medicines and explain how to take the drugs that have been prescribed to you.

In most cases you must take the prescription your HIV doctor gives you to the clinic/hospital pharmacy. A high street chemist will not be able to help.

Finally

Return to reception and make an appointment for your next visit, even if this is several months away. Planning early will help you find a time that is most convenient for you.