

Understanding the 18 week elective pathway and referral process, your rights and responsibilities

Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust is committed to providing timely access to services and treatment for all patients that are referred into the hospital. The NHS Constitution gives patients the right to access services within maximum waiting times, or for the NHS to take all reasonable steps to offer you a range of suitable alternative providers if this is not possible. Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust has developed a Patient Access Policy to ensure that you are aware of your rights and responsibilities when you are referred.

For routine, non-urgent conditions it is your right your treatment starts within 18 weeks of referral unless you choose to wait longer or it is clinically appropriate that you wait longer. The maximum waiting times are described in the [Handbook to the NHS Constitution](#).

Your GP's responsibilities

- Your GP will establish whether you are fit and available to attend appointments.
- Your GP will also inform you that you should be prepared to be seen and treated within 18 weeks (for routine and non-urgent conditions). The time you wait will depend on your condition and the service that you have been referred to.
- The GP will also discuss the choice of options available to you.

Your responsibilities

- You should inform the hospital or GP if treatment and/or appointments are no longer required.
- You should attend agreed appointments and give sufficient notice in the event you need to change the agreed date or time. Your GP should also explain to you that should you fail to keep appointments, you may be discharged by the hospital back to the care of your GP if a clinician feels it is appropriate. If you have cancelled or did not attend appointments you will wait longer for treatment of your condition. If you do not attend appointments you risk waiting longer than 18 weeks for treatment for your condition and you will not be offered treatment with alternative providers.
- Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust will always take particular care to ensure cancer patients, vulnerable adults and children are appropriately managed if they do not attend appointments.

My 18 week 'clock'

The hospital uses a 'clock' to monitor your 18 week pathway from referral to treatment. The 'clock' starts when the hospital receives your referral and continues to 'tick' until you have received treatment for the condition for which you have been referred. Treatment can include advice, prescriptions, physiotherapy or surgery and will also stop your clock if no treatment is required for your condition.

What happens when the hospital receives my referral?

Your 18 week pathway begins from the date the hospital receives your referral letter into a Consultant led service i.e. the 'clock' starts ticking. This is where a consultant will take overall clinical responsibility for your treatment. Your referral is checked by a doctor to ensure you have been referred to the correct doctor or service.

What can I expect from my first outpatient appointment?

At your first outpatient appointment, your consultant will talk you through the best treatment options for your condition. These options can include:

- Deciding that you do not require hospital treatment for your symptoms at this time and referring you back to the care of your GP. In this scenario your 18 week 'clock' will be stopped
- Referral for some diagnostic tests, in which case your 18 week 'clock' will continue
- If the consultant (or specialist nurse) carries out treatment in the clinic - your 18 week 'clock' will stop
- Or, if your condition does not require treatment (or surgery) and you are given a prescription or advice for your condition - again your 18 week 'clock' will stop
- An operation – then your 18 week clock will start or continue when the consultant adds you to their surgical waiting list. Please note that your 18 week 'clock' stops on the day you are admitted for surgery.

There are times where it may not be appropriate for you to receive treatment within 18 weeks. This may be because as a patient you:

- need several tests completed in sequence
- may not be medically fit enough to receive treatment within 18 weeks
- choose to wait longer than 18 weeks
- your clinician may need to monitor your condition before they can make a decision on the most appropriate treatment
- It may sometimes be more clinically appropriate to monitor your condition rather than actively treat

When you are presented with a treatment option you may also request time to consider or discuss the treatment plan with your family. This is considered a 'patient-initiated period of active monitoring' and stops your 18 week 'clock'. You should discuss with your consultant the length of time you require to consider options. The clinician will advise on the clinical safety of such a delay. A new 18 week 'clock' will start when you inform us you are happy to have the suggested treatment.

Diagnostic tests or treatments

When you are referred for a diagnostic test or treatment, you will wait no longer than six weeks for your appointment. You will then either be given a follow-up appointment with your consultant or you will be asked to telephone the department to make an appointment as soon as you are given the date for your test.

If you attend your diagnostic appointment - and you have not been given a follow-up appointment - you should telephone for an appointment. Some consultants may decide to check the result of the test before you attend and may decide not to offer you a further appointment as you will not require treatment. In such cases the consultant will inform you and your GP of the result of your test and the reason for your discharge.

Follow-up appointments

Please attend your follow-up appointments as the clinician will have your test results available and will be ready to discuss plans for your treatment. If your symptoms improve and you do not feel you need to attend your follow up appointment, please inform the hospital so that your appointment can be used for another patient. The hospital will then close your treatment episode so that your records are kept up to date.

What you can expect if surgery is required

Pre- operative assessment appointment

Sometimes, patients added to a surgical waiting list will be offered a pre-assessment appointment. This appointment is to check that you are suitably fit for the planned surgery.

Once declared 'fit' the admissions team will be informed and they will contact you to agree your surgery date. Meanwhile your 18 week pathway continues unaffected i.e. your 'clock' keeps ticking.

Should you be declared 'unfit', you may be informed that you need a short course treatment to bring you to fitness, such as a course of antibiotics or treatment for high blood pressure, before your surgery can go ahead. In some cases, this may be managed by your GP who will inform the admissions department when you are 'fit' for surgery. Your 18 week 'clock' continues to tick

If a more serious condition is discovered that requires treatment before surgery can go ahead, you will be removed from the waiting list and reviewed in clinic until you are fit and available for surgery. In some cases this may mean that you will be discharged back into the care of your GP. He or she will inform the admissions team when you have been declared as fit for surgery, you will then be added to the waiting list. Your 18 week 'clock' will stop but will start again when you are added back to the waiting list.

Surgical Admissions

If you do require surgery, we will make you "reasonable offers" for your admission date. This means mean that the first offer will give you more than three weeks' notice and offer two different dates. It is usual for patients to make your own way to hospital by car or public transport. For those with limited mobility, Buckinghamshire County Council and voluntary organisations can provide community transport.

Patients who have been given treatment options but choose to delay their operation may potentially be putting themselves at risk of harm or compromising the outcome of their treatment. If you choose to delay your treatment for an extended period then your notes will be reviewed to ensure it is clinically appropriate to do so. The clinician may also decide to that it is more appropriate to discharge you back to your GP until you are ready for treatment.

Admission for surgery

You must ensure you have followed all instructions given to you prior to your surgery. These could include fasting instructions, where to attend, time of attendance and transport arrangements.

About the Independent Sector (Private Health Care Providers)

Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust may from time-to-time, use providers the independent sector to ensure that patients are seen within their waiting times. Not all patients will be suitable for treatment in the independent sector and those that are selected must meet strict guidelines to ensure it is clinically appropriate to do so. If you are offered treatment in the independent sector and decide that you would prefer to continue to wait for treatment at Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, you will be advised how long you may have to wait for treatment. Patients that are sent to the independent sector for treatment will have their treatment funded by Buckinghamshire NHS Trust.

How you can help us help you

- Talk to your GP about what to expect from your referral to the hospital.
- If your treatment is routine please ensure you will be available for the next 18 weeks.
- Tell us if you change your address or telephone number.
- Keep your appointments and arrive on time
- Let us know in plenty of time if you are unable to attend an appointment
- Make notes before appointments so that your questions and concerns are answered to your satisfaction and in a timely manner
- Let us know if you think that you have been waiting too long

Frequently asked questions

Are any services exempt from the 18 Week waiting time?

- Maternity services
- Non-consultant led services i.e. nurse led clinics or physiotherapy
- Planned admissions
- Emergency services
- Diagnostics only (direct access)

How are hospital appointments set?

Where possible you will be offered a choice of dates. Your GP may book your appointment through the E-referral Service, which allows direct access to hospital appointment scheduling. Some services may choose to send you a letter with an appointment date already made for you. If you need to change this appointment you may do so and it will not affect your 18 week waiting time.

Alternatively, the hospital may send you a letter asking you to contact the hospital to make your appointment. While we aim to offer you a choice of appointments, if you are unable to agree a date within 18 weeks then we may refer you back to your GP and ask that you contact us nearer the time you will be available.

Can I choose where I am to be referred?

If your GP refers you for specialist treatment, you can choose from a range of NHS, private and independent hospitals across England.

Can I delay my appointment or treatment?

Your referral may be made through the E-Referral Service (formerly Choose and Book) or via a referral letter. Your GP should advise that you'll need to be available to attend appointments (within 18 weeks for a routine treatment). In both cases, should you have commitments or holidays booked that make you unavailable, your GP may decide to delay the referral until you are available.

What if I am a military veteran?

If you have served with the Armed Forces (for a minimum of one day) or are currently a member of the Armed Forces – please highlight this to the person referring you for treatment eg your GP, as per the Ministry Of Defence Armed Forces Covenant.

Veterans should receive priority NHS treatment for clinical conditions that require treatment.

Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust has an obligation to ensure that your pathway is not delayed and that you are prioritised against patients with the same clinical need. If you are a veteran, it is important that you notify your current GP if you move house, particularly if you're on a waiting list for medical treatment. This

ensures that your details are transferred across to other relevant health services so that you don't lose your place on the list.

What happens if I need to cancel or rearrange my first new outpatient appointment?

You may cancel/rearrange your new appointment once without affecting your 18 week waiting time. If you choose to cancel a second appointment you will be referred back to your GP who will discuss your referral and treatment options with you.

What if the hospital cancels my appointment?

If the hospital cancels your appointment your 18 week 'clock' will keep ticking. Buckinghamshire NHS Trust is committed to reducing hospital cancellations and will take all reasonable steps to avoid cancelling your appointment. We will always try to explore every option available before we decide to cancel your appointment. If we do cancel your appointment, we will do our very best to get your next appointment booked within four weeks of the cancelled appointment.

What if I do not attend my agreed appointment?

Although the vast majority of patients attend all of their appointments, unfortunately, some patients do not, which can cause delays for you and the NHS. If you miss your first appointment without advance notification, the clinician will decide whether it is appropriate to refer you back to your GP. The GP may then refer you again, if and when appropriate. If the consultant decides to offer you a further appointment your 18 Week waiting time will re-set from the date you are contacted and agree your next appointment.

The hospital will never routinely discharge children, vulnerable adults or cancer patients if they do not attend an appointment.

What if the hospital cancels my operation?

The hospital will make every effort not to cancel dates for surgery but on occasion we may have to. You will be kept fully informed as to the reason for the cancellation and the date when you are likely to have your surgery rebooked. If you are cancelled either before your surgery date or on the date of surgery your 18 week clock will continue to tick.

If the hospital cancels your surgery on the day you are due to have your surgery due to non-clinical reasons e.g. consultant called away due to emergency, the hospital will make every effort to offer you a surgery date within 28 days of your cancelled date.

What if I don't turn up for my operation?

If you do not attend your date for surgery and have not informed the hospital it is likely you will be discharged back to your GP. The consultant will decide whether you should be given another date for surgery. Your 18 week 'clock' will stop.

What happens to my waiting list place if I have to visit the Emergency Department?

If you require emergency surgery for the same operation that you are on the waiting list for – your 'clock' stops and you are removed off the waiting list and your GP informed

What happens if I feel that I have waited too long?

If you feel that your treatment has not started within 18 weeks timescale i.e. since the time of your referral or that you feel there is a risk that you will not be treated within 18 weeks then please contact the number on the referral letter.

If you are still not satisfied, please call our PALS office who will direct you to the responsible manager.

01296 316042

Or write to PALS at

Pals@buckshealthcare.nhs.uk

We will check how long you have been waiting and what is planned to happen to you next. We will confirm whether it is possible or not possible to treat you within 18 weeks

What if it's not possible to treat me within 18 weeks?

We can offer you the choice of staying under the care of your current consultant and wait longer than 18 weeks for the start of treatment (*Note: this will be recorded as a failure on our part*). We will investigate and if available we will offer you a clinically appropriate alternative provider who would be able to treat you sooner.

Where can I find further information?

You can discover more about your rights under the NHS Constitution here

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-nhs-constitution-for-england>

There's more about the rules governing 18 Week waiting times here

<http://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/rtt-waiting-times/rtt-guidance/>

For further information and to read the full BHT Elective Access Policy –[please click here](#)