

A summary for patients

# Management of patients on NHS waiting lists

What do I need to know?

Prepared for the Auditor General for Scotland  
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 AUDIT SCOTLAND



## About our report

We looked at waiting lists to check if NHS boards across Scotland are running hospital waiting lists properly and treating patients fairly.

We did this because NHS Lothian admitted that they were wrongly marking patients as unavailable for hospital appointments. This meant some patients were waiting longer for their treatment than they should have been.

When we looked across Scotland we saw that the percentage of patients on waiting lists marked as unavailable for certain hospital treatments differed greatly across the country.

We also found an increasing number of patients waited longer than their target waiting time to see a hospital doctor or to receive hospital treatment since 2011.

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## What happens next?

Our report makes various recommendations. These are actions we consider the Scottish Government and NHS boards can take to improve how waiting times are managed.

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## How long will I have to wait?

The government's waiting time target for most patients is 18 weeks or less. This is from when your GP, optician or dentist decides you need to see a hospital doctor, to when you're treated in hospital. Once you've seen a hospital doctor, had any tests and your treatment is agreed, hospitals must, by law, provide this within 12 weeks. This is usually within the 18-week overall target. Some treatments are not covered by this target, for example treatment related to maternity services or mental health services.

Any periods you are unavailable for treatment don't count towards your total waiting time.

## Reasons you may be unavailable

If you let the hospital know about particular times you can't receive treatment, for example you're going on holiday, the hospital will mark you as unavailable for this time. You can also be marked as unavailable due to medical reasons, for example if you have another condition, like high blood pressure, that needs to be fixed before you can be treated.

### Remember...

- If in doubt, check with the hospital how long you should expect to wait.
- If you're going to be unavailable, for example going on holiday or have work commitments, let the hospital know in advance.

### Will I receive fair treatment on a waiting list?

We found that most hospitals don't keep enough information to show that waiting lists are properly run. As government targets for waiting times got shorter, the number of patients marked as unavailable for treatment increased. Often, patient records didn't include any reasons to explain the unavailability, so we couldn't see whether this was appropriate.

We recommend hospitals record enough information to be confident waiting lists are properly managed and patients are treated fairly.

We also found that it wasn't always clear if hospitals helped patients understand the waiting system and how patients' actions could affect how long they waited. For example, if you don't attend an appointment you can be put back to the end of the queue.

We recommend that hospitals make your rights and responsibilities clear when you join a waiting list. This is so you're fairly treated and know what to expect and how your actions might affect the time you wait.

#### Remember...

- If you need to cancel an appointment, you could reduce your waiting time by letting the hospital know as soon as possible.
- If the hospital cancels your appointment then you should still be seen within your original target waiting time.

### What about my specific needs?

We previously recommended that hospitals record patients' special needs, for example if you need a translator or have problems hearing. This is so they can provide any help you need to come to hospital. This was not happening for everyone. New guidelines mean this should now happen.

We recommend that hospitals find out if patients have special needs and provide the support they need to come to hospital for an appointment or treatment.

#### Remember...

- Let your GP know if you have any particular needs.
- If the hospital contacts you, check they've received details of your needs from your GP.

### Do I have any say in where I'm seen?

We found many hospitals didn't make clear in advance where they might expect patients to go for treatment, for example to a private hospital or a hospital in a different area. New guidance means hospitals should make this clear to you beforehand.

If patients asked for a particular hospital or doctor, some hospitals marked them as unavailable for treatment until an appointment was available. This meant they might have to wait longer than the target time. We weren't always sure that patients knew that their choice might mean waiting longer.

We recommend that hospitals regularly look at how many patients are waiting for appointments in particular hospitals or with specific doctors so that they can reduce the risk of these patients waiting longer. We also recommend that hospitals make it clear to you that asking to go to a particular hospital or doctor might mean a longer wait.

#### Remember...

- You should be told in advance which hospital you may be asked to attend for an appointment.
- If you only want to go to a particular hospital or doctor this might mean waiting longer.

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If you would like to find out more on this topic, you can download a copy of the full report from our website or contact our report team at [info@audit-scotland.gov.uk](mailto:info@audit-scotland.gov.uk)

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