

An update from NHS England on access to NHS dental services (Feb '21)

Access to dental care has been a big topic during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Current situation

Whilst dental services are still functioning, the **priority** remains for dentists to focus on:

- patients who require access to urgent care
- patients at higher risk of oral disease
- patients with outstanding treatment needs that cannot be delayed.

All dental practices are continuing to provide *remote consultations with 'triage' and 'advice as necessary' options.*

Dental practices are also prioritising the health and safety of patients and staff. This means that strict infection prevention control procedures are necessary between each dental appointment, which reduces the number of patients which can be treated daily.

The need for infection control has had a significant impact on patients wishing to resume their routine dental check-ups and treatments. *Patients requiring routine dental care such as check-ups and scale and polish will inevitably experience longer waiting times.*

The Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and letters from the Chief Dental Officer outlining a phased transition to the resumption of the full range of dental services are subject to regular updates.

Action being taken by NHS England and NHS Improvement South-East

All practices have been instructed that they should deal with any patient who calls them within their NHS capacity, whether or not they have seen that patient in the past. This means that if a patient enquires whether the practice is 'taking on' NHS patients, the practice should ***assess whether the patient has an urgent need, is at high risk of oral disease, or has outstanding treatment that cannot be delayed.***

Practices should not be using their appointment times for routine care if they are unable to meet the urgent appointment needs that patients are presenting to them. This does not necessarily mean that patients with an urgent need will *automatically* be offered a face-to-face appointment but if it is identified that a patient needs to be seen, the practice can arrange for this happen. Each surgery though has a separate contract to fulfil which means that there will be varying sizes in the capacity for each surgery. NHS England and NHS Improvement (South-East) also recently approved 17 practices in the area to provide additional hours in support of patients who do not attend the Dentist regularly and are in need of urgent treatment. They will commence service provision this month.

n.b. as part of the re-commissioned NHS dental services in Portsmouth, a new practice will be open in the south of Portsmouth and will start to see patients on 1 April 2021.

Information for patients

We understand that this is a confusing time for members of the public trying to access NHS dental care. Practices are communicating with their regular patients to keep them

informed of services available from their practice and what they need to do to access these. Practices are also responsible for ensuring their information is up-to-date on the NHS website so that members of the public without a regular dentist can search for services local to them.

If patients do attend a dental practice on a regular basis then they should contact that practice if they believe they have an urgent need. If not, they can search for a dentist in their local area on the NHS website or they can call NHS 111 who will direct them to the NHS practice closest to their home address.

We ask patients to be understanding of the current situation with regards to the prioritisation of those with urgent needs and be respectful of the clinical decision. The dentist is best placed to clinically assess their dental issue. If they are deemed non-urgent, we would ask that they don't then call NHS 111 for a second opinion leaving the service free to deal with other patients with urgent health issues.

What can your NHS dentist do for you?



The NHS provides essential treatments needed to keep your mouth, teeth and gums healthy and free of pain. Any treatment that is clinically necessary should be available. Here is some advice and details of the treatments and costs, giving you the knowledge to smile with confidence.

Finding a dentist
www.nhs.uk/dentists



Visiting your dentist during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Please only visit your practice if you have an appointment and book an appointment only if essential – dentists are currently prioritising the vulnerable or those with the most urgent need.
- Appointments for some routine treatments, such as dental check-ups, may have to be rescheduled for a later date.
- Your practice will look a little different than usual as they will be operating in a way that observes COVID-19 social distancing and hygiene rules to ensure everyone's safety.

Your first routine visit

- The dental practice will take your medical and dental history (if available) and carry out a check up; examining your mouth, teeth and gums.
- Following your check up if your dentist recommends dental treatment, you'll be given a plan. This outlines all the treatments you are having and how much they will cost. If you are not given a treatment plan, ask for one.
- Your dentist will recommend a date for your next visit. People with good oral health may need to attend once every 12 to 24 months, but those with more problems may need to visit more often.



Emergency dental care

- Anyone who needs emergency dental care should first call their dental practice.
- If you cannot contact your dentist or do not have one, patients are advised to use the NHS 111 online service: www.111.nhs.uk