

## What is included in this guide?

This Healthwatch guide provides you with the key information about seeing a dentist through the NHS. For a more detailed guide please [click here](#).

If you have any questions or comments about dentistry, please contact us:

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## Who has written this guide?

This guide has been produced by local Healthwatch teams from Brighton and Hove, East Sussex and West Sussex based on dental issues affecting Sussex residents. Healthwatch worked with local dentists to write this guide.

## Who is Healthwatch?

Healthwatch is your independent health and social care champion. We make sure that those running services put you at the heart of care. We listen to what you like about services and what you think needs to be improved and feed this back to those in charge. We provide you with information about services.

## Changes announced in July 2022 to improve access to dental services

On 19<sup>th</sup> July, NHS England [announced changes](#) to the NHS dental contract – the first in 16 years. The contract sets out what NHS treatment dentists can provide and how much they get paid for this. The stories people have shared about their difficulties in getting a dental appointment have shown the impact of the poor state of dental services, leading to these changes.

The changes should make it is easier for people to see which dentists are taking on new NHS patients. Those with more complex dental problems should also have better access to care. It is hoped that these measures will end long waiting times.

The changes are just the first step to improve dental services and mean that dental therapists will also be able to accept patients for NHS treatments, providing fillings, sealants, preventative care for adults and children, which will free up dentists' time for urgent and complex cases.

Dentists will also be required to update the [NHS website and directory of services](#) so patients can easily find the availability of dentists in their local area.

### *How COVID has affected NHS dental services*

#### ***What you need to know***

NHS dentistry has been significantly affected by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), resulting in fewer available appointments.

NHS dental services are open for business, but it is not yet 'Business as Usual'. Dentists are prioritising patients according to clinical need. It is important to clearly explain what your need is and what impact it is having when contacting a dentist (see below). You may wait longer for routine, non-urgent treatments on the NHS. Waiting lists for non-urgent routine check-ups can be several months.

### *NHS and private dental treatment*

#### ***What you need to know***

High street dentists are private businesses that work for the NHS to provide dental care for patients. Strict criteria govern what and how many NHS treatments dentists can provide. Please click this [link](#) to learn more about the different dental treatments that are available through the NHS.

NHS dental care is subsidised by the government. This means that some of the cost of looking after your teeth has already been paid for. Unless you are exempt, you will need to pay for most NHS treatment (see below).

The NHS can pay towards your treatment if a dentist says that you have a clinical "need" and the dentist has the capacity to provide the treatment. If they do not have the capacity, they may offer to treat you privately.

NHS dental treatment looks after the health of your teeth but does not cover cosmetic treatments. Private treatment looks after the health of your teeth **and also** cosmetic treatments. You must fully cover the costs of each private treatment received. Finance plans or dental insurance are available to help.

Your dentist must explain what treatment you need and how much of the cost will be met through the NHS or privately by you. You should always confirm what these costs are before starting treatment and whether it is provided through the NHS.

## Registering with a dentist

### **What you need to know**

You do not need to formally register with a dentist in the same way as with a GP.

You can attend any dentist as long as they have the capacity to see you.

The NHS has a website that lets you [search for an NHS dentist near you](#) by entering your town, city, or postcode. This should help you identify dentists who are offering NHS treatment but not their availability, so you must contact practices directly to enquire. You will be asked to fill in a new patient form at your first visit.

Registering for a course of treatment does not necessarily mean that you are permanently registered with the same dental practice. You should always enquire directly with the dental practice.

## Routine check-ups

### **What you need to know**

Dental practices will not always have the capacity to take on new NHS patients. Many practices will prioritise seeing those patients who are already on their database. You may, therefore, be asked to join a waiting list to be seen. Average waiting times for routine check-ups are up to 6 months.

If your teeth and gums are healthy, you may not need a routine check-up for up to 24 months. The dentist will advise you on how often you need a check-up. They should also advise you how often you should have a check-up in order to continue to be seen as an NHS patient.

In between check-ups the NHS provides [advice](#) on how to maintain healthy teeth and gums.

If you do not make or attend NHS appointments with the frequency specified by the dentist your dental health may be at risk. You may also be removed from the patient database of that practice.

## How to explain what your dental need is

### What you need to know

It is important to clearly explain what your need is and what impact it is having, e.g. if you are in pain, experiencing difficulties eating or sleeping, or have any facial swelling.

Dental practices determine the urgency of your treatment by taking a detailed history of your symptoms. This helps them get an idea of the diagnosis which will then help them decide how quickly you need to be seen.

You should explain if your dental need is linked to other health problems.

You also need to tell the dentist or receptionist if you are in a vulnerable patient group. This includes people who are homeless, travellers, migrants or refugees and looked after children.

Further advice about how to explain your dental need can be found in our [detailed guide](#).

If you require urgent or emergency support, ask if the practice can see you for urgent treatment through the NHS. If that is not possible you may be offered a private appointment. Having private treatment does not mean that you cannot return to NHS treatment in the future, and this may even be possible with the same dentist.

If you are unable to contact or see a dentist and you believe it is urgent, call [NHS 111](#). Only visit Emergency Departments (A&E) in serious circumstances, such as:

- When you are in severe pain that a dentist is unable to help you with
- If you are experiencing heavy bleeding
- If you have severe facial or oral swelling
- If you have injuries to the face, mouth, or teeth.

You may find some relief using remedies at home whilst you wait for treatment. A guide to Home Care is available by [clicking here](#). A high-street pharmacist may also be able to offer you advice.

## Costs of NHS dental treatment

### What you need to know

Before starting your treatment remember to ask questions:

- "Is this NHS or private treatment?"
- "What is the cost of my treatment, and how much of my treatment will be met by the NHS?"

Regardless of the treatment you have, you should understand what dental treatment has been suggested and how much it will cost. You should only be charged for private dental treatment if you agreed to have private dental treatment.

Ask for a [written treatment plan](#) which explains what treatment you are having and the costs involved. You should sign this and ask for a copy.

Dental practices have different procedures. Following an assessment of your treatment needs, some dental practices may ask for the whole payment for your treatment up front, some will ask you to pay after it has all been completed and others may ask you to pay in stages. Check with your surgery when you go for your initial check-up.

NHS treatments are provided under one of three [Bands](#). Click this link to learn more about [NHS costs](#).

If you need further treatment, in some cases you will not need to pay again within two months of your initial treatment. And some treatments are guaranteed for 12 months (our detailed guide provides more information).

Some people are eligible for free NHS treatment, and financial support is available for others. To check the costs of treatment and whether you are eligible for free treatment, or support with paying, visit the [NHS website](#), or read our [detailed guide](#).

## **Making a complaint**

### **What you need to know**

You have the right to raise a concern or complaint if you are not happy with any aspect of your treatment.

You can make a complaint directly with the dental practice – ideally using their complaints process or policy. It is best to do this in writing or by email so that you will receive a written reply.

If you would rather not deal with the practice, you can contact NHS England (see details below) who are responsible for commissioning (buying) NHS dental services

If you are not happy with the response you get, you can complain to NHS England.

- email: [england.contactus@nhs.net](mailto:england.contactus@nhs.net)
- phone: 0300 311 2233
- visit the [NHS England website](https://www.nhs.uk)

If you are unable to find a local dentist who can see you, and NHS England has been unable to help you find a dentist, you should raise your concerns by contacting your local Healthwatch and NHS England.

## **Links to other information**

**NHS Dental Services.** Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm, 03001 231663

Call the Helpline for details of dentists in Brighton & Hove accepting NHS patients for routine and urgent treatment.

**Emergency Dental Service** (Brighton & Hove). This is an evening / weekend service for anyone with dental pain. Please phone 03000 242548, Monday to Friday 5:30–10:30pm, or Saturday, Sunday and Bank Holidays 9am to 5.30pm. This service is delivered by [idental care limited](#).

**NHS – [Easyread guide – What your dentist can do for you](#)**

**NHS – [Dental services](#)**