



# What to expect from your doctor: a guide for patients

Based on *Good medical practice*

General  
Medical  
Council

Regulating doctors  
Ensuring good medical practice

Patients receive the best care when they work in partnership with doctors.

This guide explains how you can help to create a partnership with your doctor. Much of it is simply common sense, but following it should help you get the most out of your time with your doctor.

It is based on the standards the General Medical Council (GMC) sets for doctors in our core guidance *Good medical practice*.



## Doctors must provide good care

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The evidence suggests that the vast majority of patients have an excellent and trusting relationship with their doctors. With respect and understanding on both sides, you should be able to develop such a relationship. The support and feedback that patients provide is vital for doctors in helping them work effectively and in continuing to improve standards of practice.

From the outset, to provide you with the best care and treatment the doctor will need to find out what's wrong with you.

They must listen to your explanation of why you have come to see them, and take into account your previous and current health and illnesses, as well as your lifestyle and your views. They should examine you physically when necessary.

It is important to be as frank and open as you can. You may find it helpful to make some notes beforehand to take with you, so you do not leave out some information that will help the doctor understand your situation.

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## What will my doctor tell me?

They will offer you advice, medicines or other treatment based on the best available evidence. Many of us find it difficult to take in all the information our doctor is sharing with us and it is important to ask for clarification if you need it. In particular, you should understand whether you need to prepare for the treatment or any tests, and that you are clear on the instructions for taking medicines.

Again, do ask your doctor if you are not sure of anything he or she has said, including when or how you should take any medicine or why you need to have any tests.

If you feel your doctor has not made the right diagnosis or is not offering the right treatment, you can ask for a second opinion from another doctor.

## Helping to train students and doctors

Everyone who sees you should introduce themselves and explain how they fit into the team looking after you. Training the next generation of doctors is a key part of any healthcare system. Medical students cannot learn all they need to know from books and will, at times, be part of the team. If for any reason you would prefer not to help in medical student training, you have the right to decline.

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Once doctors are qualified, they will undergo further training in a specialty or to become a GP, and will be part of the teams looking after patients. They will see patients and take part in their care in ways that are appropriate to their level of training. All doctors must continue to learn throughout their careers and keep up to date in their areas of practice.

It is a key part of their role for doctors to refer their patients to other doctors or other health professionals. They should provide treatments and other services only if they have the relevant knowledge and skills to do so safely.

No doctor can know everything. They will often ask a colleague for help or refer you to another doctor where the care you need is outside their expertise.

### **Doctors must use resources responsibly**

You can help them to do this by managing minor illnesses yourself and by making sure you follow treatment instructions and attend appointments, or cancel them in advance. For example, completing courses of antibiotics even when you feel better helps prevent antibiotic resistance which can harm other patients.



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## Doctors must put patients' safety first and make sure the care they provide is safe and effective

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Doctors must take prompt action if they think that a patient's safety, dignity or comfort is being compromised. Tell a doctor, nurse or another health professional if you see anything that you feel could put you – or someone else – at risk.

Doctors have to report when things go wrong for patients – for example accidents and mistakes, or when patients get serious side effects from medicines – so lessons can be learned. Make sure you tell doctors about any suspected side effects from medicines you have taken, or if there is anything else you are concerned about.

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### **Doctors must review their own practice**

All doctors should have an annual appraisal to review their performance and identify areas where they can develop their practice. At least once every five years they also have to seek formal feedback from their patients. You can help by completing questionnaires and by doing so honestly and fairly.

Doctors review their work and results and compare their own performance with other doctors and other teams. This review of their work helps them identify any areas of their practice that they can improve. Normally your name and any other details that could identify you are taken out of records before they are used in this way. But sometimes that is not practical. You can help doctors improve their performance by agreeing to your records being used.



Doctors must be polite and considerate to you and people close to you, and treat you with dignity and respect.

You should also be polite and show respect to your doctors.

## Doctors must treat patients as individuals

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Doctors must listen to you and respond to your questions and concerns.

Doctors should give you information and advice in a way you can understand. Tell your doctor, practice or clinic in advance if you need help with communication (for example, an interpreter or signer). Ask your doctor to explain anything you do not understand, including any technical words or jargon.

Doctors will tell you about treatment options that will work for you or will explain if there is not a treatment available.

They may recommend one treatment option, but it is up to you to decide which option you want and you can decide not to have treatment. You should make sure you follow instructions on how to take medicines or follow advice about what to do before and after a medical procedure.

Doctors must be polite and considerate to you and people close to you, and treat you with dignity and respect. You should also be polite and show respect to your doctors.

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## Doctors must be honest and trustworthy

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Doctors have to treat all their patients fairly and without discrimination. If you can see ways that doctors could improve their services, you should let them know.

Your doctors will keep information about you securely, but they will need to share information with their colleagues to make sure you get the care you need. In general practice, for example, reception staff may manage repeat prescriptions, type referral letters and do other tasks that mean they need to see your records.

If you have any worries about who can see your records, talk to your GP or the manager at your practice.

Your doctors must obey the law and act honestly in financial and commercial matters.

Doctors must be honest and open with you if something has gone wrong with your care or treatment. They will explain what has happened and apologise where appropriate.

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Your doctors should not use their professional relationship or contact with you to try to impose their own beliefs on you, or to pursue a sexual relationship.

If you are concerned about something your doctor has done, you can make a complaint. Usually you should complain locally – to your GP practice or local hospital.

If you are not satisfied with the response, you can raise your concerns through local NHS procedures or with local patient organisations, such as:

- Healthwatch in England
- Patient and Client Council in Northern Ireland
- Patient Advice and Support Service in Scotland
- Community Health Council in Wales.

If you are still concerned, you can complain direct to the GMC.



# About the GMC

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Only doctors on our register can work in the UK, either as a GP or a hospital doctor, in the NHS or private sector.

Our job is to set standards, oversee the education and training of doctors and make sure that every doctor with a licence to practise medicine in the UK is competent and up to date.

At a local level, every doctor now has a responsible officer – a senior doctor who makes sure they are meeting our standards, including keeping their skills and knowledge up to date.

Trust lies at the heart of the relationship between doctors and patients and, for the vast majority of people, this works well. However, where a patient or relative does have a concern or complaint about a doctor's practice or behaviour, these can usually be settled locally. And if a doctor is not safe – and should not be able to work in another hospital or GP practice – that is when the GMC will step in.

The GMC is independent of government, but accountable to the UK parliament. It is paid for by the doctors it registers.

## How we can help you

You can learn about the standards we expect from your doctors at [www.gmc-uk.org/guidance](http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance).

You can find out when and where your doctor qualified and whether they have completed specialist training.

You can read about cases where we have had to take action to protect patients.

## What to do if you are unhappy about the care or treatment provided by your doctor

Most complaints and comments can be settled locally. If you are not sure who to go to, we can help. Look on our website at [www.gmc-uk.org/patientshelp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/patientshelp) or call us on **0161 923 6602**.

**Note:** This guide has been prepared for patients – it is not formal guidance for doctors. They must follow the standards and principles set out in *Good medical practice* and its supporting guidance.

Email: [gmc@gmc-uk.org](mailto:gmc@gmc-uk.org)

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