

Get the most from YOUR GP

E-consultations, video calls, telephone appointments... Louise Atkinson offers a post-lockdown guide to navigating the new relationship with your local surgery

It would be impossible *not* to notice that things have changed significantly at doctor's surgeries across the UK. Pre-pandemic, the route to seeing your GP was simple: make a phone call; book an on-the-day appointment or diarise one for later, if your issue was non-urgent. The – often very long – pre-appointment sit in the waiting room was a familiar part of the process. But Covid changed everything, fast. Suddenly, face-to-face appointments were largely consigned to the dustbin of history. Instead, as the pandemic hit, both GPs and patients were thrust into a shiny new world of phone appointments, e-consultations and video calls. We expected things to slowly return to normal, but instead, nearly two years later, many of us still struggle to get a face-to-face appointment. Why? Well, a perfect storm of the pandemic, a GP recruitment crisis, and a huge surge in demand means that doctor's surgeries are busier than ever.

REMOTE WORKING

'There's no doubt that Covid accelerated changes, and both doctors and patients now see other modes of contact as equally valuable – and sometimes preferable,' says Dr Gary Howsam, a practising GP who works in Peterborough, and vice chair of the Royal College of GPs. 'We are really starting to make the most of technology. Sometimes a physical examination is a very important part of the diagnosis, but sometimes other issues can be easier to handle remotely.'

In fact, due to unprecedented demand and swamped phone lines, it is often easier and quicker to submit an online request



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(known as an e-consultation) than ring your surgery. And if you're an online sceptic, it might be time to give it a go, says London GP Dr Murray Ellender. 'We learned a lot through the pandemic and online services have really improved. It might not be ideal for everyone, but it does work really well. If you do have digital access, try it!' He explains that every practice works in different ways, but you can usually fill out an e-consultation form via a link on your surgery's website.

ILLUSTRATION: CONNIE NOBLE

Making it work

Want to get the most from your phone consultation? Here's how...

WRITE IT DOWN

'Making a note of two or three important questions, your ideas, concerns and expectations before your appointment is very useful,' says Dr Ellender. 'It is easy for a consultation to become side-tracked, so it's good to have your main concerns to hand.'

FIND A QUIET SPOT

Identify ahead of time somewhere quiet and private you can take the call – especially if you're at work – and ensure you've got a good phone signal. Let colleagues or family members know you can't be interrupted.

PICK UP THE PHONE!

Don't reject a call on your mobile because the number is withheld or unknown while you're waiting for your appointment, as that's likely to be your GP getting in touch.

NEED TO RING THE SURGERY?

Avoid calling between 8am and 10am, advises Dr Ellender. 'This is the busiest time at most practices,' he says.

to phone, remember that receptionists will flag symptoms which require an in-person appointment, according to NHS guidelines – these include potentially cancerous lumps, severe headaches, any condition that the patient has presented with more than three times without improvement, and a fever in children under one.

Another option, if you're keen to get an answer quickly, is to ask a pharmacist. Because many pharmacies are open outside office hours, pharmacists are an invaluable source of advice, particularly when it comes to the management of your prescription medication. Sandra Gidley, a pharmacist and former president of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, urges people to speak up. 'There's no such thing as a stupid question,' she says. 'If you're not sure about something, then yours is a *valid* question. And talking to patients is often the most interesting part of a pharmacist's day!'

DURING YOUR APPOINTMENT

Still, there will always be times when we'd rather talk to a person about any health issues. To avoid getting stuck in a long phone queue, don't ring during the busiest times of day, advises Dr Ellender, which for most surgeries is the morning. 'Or go to the surgery in person and ask a

receptionist for their advice on the best way to access care – each practice is different, and things are changing fast, so it's a good idea to find out what your GPs prefer.'

When you do get to see or speak to a GP, Dr Ellender says: 'Aim to be clear about what you want from the consultation – whether you are looking for reassurance, medication, tests, or a referral; one of our main jobs as a GP is to extract the thing you are really worrying about, but if you can be clear about that right from the beginning, the rest of your appointment can be time better spent.'

'I love seeing patients face-to-face, but through the pandemic we have found that many patients really would prefer to avoid sitting in a packed waiting room when their problems can be resolved more quickly online,' says practising GP – and president of the Royal College of GPs – Dr Clare Gerada. 'I would urge everyone to be patient. We are in the middle of a digital revolution and dealing with a pandemic at the same time, and we are trying to find the right balance.' ■