

Getting the most from your health service

MANY PEOPLE DO NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE GOING TO THEIR DOCTOR OR GOING ALONG FOR AN APPOINTMENT AT THE HOSPITAL. WE LOOK AT WAYS WHICH WILL HELP YOU TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR HEALTH SERVICE.

Visiting your doctor

Your doctor is likely to be your first port of call if you are either having difficulties in getting pregnant or are now pregnant. Unfortunately, most of us will have doctors who are quite busy and this can mean that we don't get the best out of our visits. So how can we get the most of our visit?

First of all, **be clear in your own mind** why you are going. Most doctors' appointments are for less than ten minutes so try not to waste time with the things that are not that important to you.

Next, if you are going for help because you are finding it hard to get pregnant, **be ready to talk** about your menstrual cycle and the times when you have sex in the month. Think about this information before you go in and do not be embarrassed about it. If you are pregnant, your doctor will need to know when your last period was and also may ask about your partner's medical history if you know it.

Be honest with yourself. Doctors are not mind readers and so can only go on the information you give them. If you are not honest, they will find it much harder to treat you and to give you good advice. Think about how much you really are smoking or how often you really do take exercise. Doctors these days are used to all kinds of lifestyles and goings on.

Finally, don't be afraid to **ask questions** or to tell your doctor that you do not understand something. If you find this difficult to do, make sure that you bring along your partner, a friend or a relative who can do this for you. This can be very useful because many of us forget exactly what we're told by the doctor.

Focus on midwives

Your midwife, who more than likely will be a woman, will be a key person during pregnancy. Midwives specialise in the routine care of pregnant women and the delivery of babies. They will check on your health as well as the health of your baby and you are likely to see your GP only if there is a medical problem that they cannot deal with. Most women find their midwives extremely helpful and supportive and they usually have much more time than doctors. This means it can be easier to discuss emotions and feelings with them.

First visit

On your first visit, you will be able to discuss any concerns or issues that you have and also find out about how you are going to be looked after and what choices are available. For example you may want to talk about having a home birth or be cared for by the same midwife throughout the pregnancy.

Your midwife will also need plenty of information from you. This will help her work out what type of care or support you will need to have a healthy pregnancy. Don't worry if you don't know all the answers to her questions. Many women do not know the date of their last period or about their partner's medical history. If you are not sure or do not know the answer, just say so. The most important thing is to try and be as accurate as you can, especially about things such as smoking or taking drugs. All information is confidential and is only used to make sure that the right care is provided for you and your baby.

GENERAL TIPS

Always make an appointment to see your GP, midwife or practice nurse.

Avoid making non-urgent appointments on Monday mornings or after bank holidays.

Tell the receptionist you wish to see your own GP.

Make a list of any issues you want to discuss. Put the one that is worrying you at the top.

Take your partner, friend or relative along if you want some support.

Be ready to ask questions.

Wear clothing that is manageable if you need to be examined or weighed.

Cancel appointments if you cannot attend.

TELL YOUR MIDWIFE OR DOCTOR IF ...

You have had a miscarriage or problems in a previous pregnancy

You have a medical condition which means that you are taking drugs e.g. epilepsy, asthma, diabetes

You or your partner has a family history of an inherited disease such as cystic fibrosis

Team list

Our quick guide to knowing who you might meet

PREGNANT WOMEN GET THE SUPPORT AND HELP OF A TEAM OF SPECIALISED PEOPLE. YOUR GP

AND COMMUNITY MIDWIFE ARE THE KEY PLAYERS IN THIS TEAM AND WILL ORGANISE YOUR CARE.

Community midwife	Community midwives are often attached to GP surgeries. Your community midwife will get to know you during the pregnancy and also look after you in the early days after you have given birth at home. A midwife may also be present at the birth.
Dietician	Dieticians provide advice about food and nutrition. If you have diabetes or need some advice with diet, your midwife or doctor may offer you an appointment with them.
Doctor , GP (General Practitioner)	Family doctors are trained in most aspects of medicine. They can provide general and medical care, but will refer you to the community midwife or obstetrician for more specialised care.
Gynaecologist	Gynaecologists are doctors who have specialised in the health of women's reproductive organs. If you have difficulty in conceiving or for example heavy periods, your doctor may refer you to a gynaecologist. Many gynaecologists also specialise in obstetrics.
Health Visitor	Health visitors are trained nurses who have specialised in the health of the whole family. Health visitors are often attached to GPs surgeries or health clinics. Your health visitor will contact you either before or just after you have given birth. They will give you support and advice once your baby is born.
Hospital midwife	Hospital midwives deliver babies in hospitals, provide antenatal care and advice and also support women in hospital before and after they have given birth.
Obstetrician	Obstetricians are doctors who have specialised in the care of pregnant women. The most senior obstetricians in hospitals are called consultants. Most women see an obstetrician at some point in the pregnancy, although if a pregnancy and birth is without complications, care will be the responsibility of midwives. Many obstetricians also specialise in gynaecology.
Paediatrician	Paediatricians are doctors who have specialised in the care of babies and children. Most hospitals use paediatricians to routinely check newborn babies.
Physiotherapist	Physiotherapists are trained to assess, treat and also prevent difficulties in movement. If you have a pre-existing back problem or difficulty in moving, you may be referred to see a physiotherapist who will help you during the pregnancy. Physiotherapists are often involved in antenatal classes to give advice about coping with birth and also getting fit afterwards.
Radiographer	During your pregnancy, you will be offered at least one ultrasound scan. These are usually carried out by radiographers or specialist midwives and nurses.

Q&A

Q What should I do if I don't get on with my GP or midwife?

A Although rare, some women do want to change GP or midwife. This is quite straightforward to do and best done as early on in the pregnancy as possible. This means that the new person taking over your care will know more about you and your needs. To switch GP, you can ask to join the list of another GP in the practice or visit another surgery and ask to join the list. If you have any difficulties in doing this, you should write to the local Area Family Practitioner Committee. Their number can be found in the yellow pages. If you do not feel comfortable with the midwife that has been assigned to your care, you should talk to your doctor. In large GP practices, there are often a team of midwives working and so changing should not be a problem. In smaller practices, your GP should be able to arrange for you to visit another midwife.

Q Do I have to have blood tests?

A While few people enjoy giving blood, it is essential that a sample is taken as part of your care. Blood that is taken is checked to find out your blood group and also whether your blood is rhesus negative. Pregnant women who are rhesus negative can have miscarriages in later pregnancies and so are treated with a simple injection. Your blood is also screened for some infections so that you can be treated or your baby can be immunised at birth. You may also be offered HIV screening as it is thought that as many as 10% of women may be positive without knowing it. It is possible to prevent a baby from becoming infected, so this test may be worth considering.

Q I hate undressing and showing people my body. I don't know how I will cope.

A Firstly, it may be reassuring to know that no one can examine you without your consent. It is important that you allow your midwife or doctor to examine you because they will gain a lot of information about the development of your baby and your ability to give birth. This mostly involves feeling your abdomen (tummy) and can be done while you are partially dressed. Tell your midwife or doctor at your first appointment that you are worried about undressing. They should be understanding and this will make it easier for you. You could also take someone such as a friend or relative with you. In practical terms, choose clothing that allows you to undress partially such as a skirt and top rather than a dress.

Q The father of the baby is not my partner. Do I have to say anything?

A Everything that you say to a midwife or doctor is confidential. Doctors and midwives are able to do their jobs better when they are given information by patients. Ideally, you should say something because the baby will be carrying the father's genes and some medical conditions can be inherited. The choice as to whether or not you say something will however be completely down to you.

On your first visit your midwife is likely to

- Ask the date of your last period
- Check your weight
- Carry out a urine test
- Take your blood pressure
- Take a blood sample so that routine tests can be done
- Ask about your family's medical history and that of your partner e.g. are there any twins in the family
- Ask if you smoke or take any medicines or drugs
- Find out about your work or other potential stresses
- Give you advice about how best you can care for yourself
- Provide you with an antenatal record card
- Arrange your next appointment
- Talk through any concerns that you may have
- Provide you with information about health services

TIPS FOR ATTENDING YOUR ANTENATAL APPOINTMENTS

When you make an antenatal appointment, find out if a urine sample will be needed

Remember to take your card with you