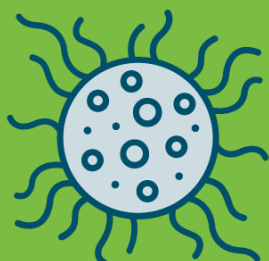


healthwatch

# What are people telling us about COVID-19?

Key messages from our evidence – 23 November 2020



## About

This regular internal briefing aims to provide an update for national health and social care stakeholders about the COVID-19 related:

- information and advice the public are asking us about,
- experiences people have shared about care with us.

This briefing focusses on people's views and experiences of:

- Getting vaccinated against flu
- Contacting GP surgeries by phone
- Maternity services and post-natal care
- Mask exemptions

The analysis draws on data from 143 local Healthwatch services across England.

## Key messages

### Flu vaccinations

Every autumn, Public Health England, NHS England and the Department for Health and Social Care run a campaign to vaccinate the most vulnerable people against flu to reduce pressure on the NHS during the winter months. With rising COVID-19 cases placing extra demands on the NHS, the effectiveness of the flu vaccination programme is more critical than ever before.

Consequently, the groups who are eligible to receive the flu vaccine has been widened. It's also more challenging for providers to carry out a flu vaccination campaign this year, due to the need to provide a COVID-19-secure environment for people to receive their vaccinations.

We have heard a mixture of experiences of the 2020/21 flu vaccination campaign so far. Many people in the target groups have been able to have their injections already. They felt reassured by the measures taken to provide a safe environment in which to have them.

**"We arrived at the Gateway expecting long queues as our appointments were three minutes apart but found only a handful of people waiting in the courtyard for their appointments. Several of them had arrived a bit early like we did. When it was five minutes before our appointment, we went inside to be greeted by two helpful marshals. We were directed to the marshal who had the list for our GP practice. The marshal was very friendly and helpful, asking the normal questions about our health and took our temperatures. We were then directed into the main hall via a one-way system. There**

were four stations for the different GP Practices. It was very quiet, not many people, lots of space and easy to see where we should go. It all felt very safe. We were called by our practice nurse, who asked the normal questions we always have before a flu injection and made us feel at ease with everything. It was then a very quick and painless injection. We then left via the one-way system. If, like me, you are concerned about going inside with other people during this stressful time please don't be, everything was well planned and carried out calmly and safely." - Healthwatch Somerset

The need to provide a COVID-19-secure environment may mean injections being provided from a central location rather than the individual's GP surgery. [Healthwatch Doncaster's research](#) found that most people would prefer to have their vaccination at their local GP surgery, and it is important for people aged over 50 who are working to have a choice of location. People in rural areas, who do not have access to transport, report finding it very difficult to access some of the centralised vaccine sites.

"Services have been limited at the village GP surgery for a while, with patients having to travel to another village to access care. Flu vaccinations will also be held at the other village. This resident says public transport is limited and with an older population, a local flu clinic should have been arranged. This person says she is speaking on behalf of a number of people in the village." - Healthwatch Northumberland

People have also told us that getting through on the phone to their GP surgery to arrange a time to have the flu vaccination can be difficult, even when a GP set up a separate phone line for this purpose. We have also had reports that some GPs have advised elderly patients to go online to book flu jabs without checking first whether it is a realistic option for them.

"Caller's spouse has received a letter from their GP practice with regard to flu vaccinations. The letter advises the patient to log on and book an appointment online and then drive to a drive thru location. There is a number to call if you don't have access to a computer. Both caller and spouse are registered at the local GP practice which is currently closed for all appointments and patients are being diverted to another surgery in a town a few miles away. Caller and spouse don't have a computer and neither of them drives. Because of the current situation they feel unable to use public transport, taxis or ask neighbours for a lift and they have no family." - Healthwatch Cornwall

People have reported that some of the communications they have received about getting the flu vaccination are confusing or misleading. Some people feel that they haven't had enough information about alternative venues to get the vaccination. Others have shared experiences of GP surgeries telling people different things in phone calls and letters about how to book an appointment.

**XX Medical Centre sent a text to advise they were commencing their flu jab programme so to call on either Monday, 28/9 or Tuesday 29/9 between 10am and 1pm to make an appointment. This number was separate to the surgery number. After continually calling for 2 days, it was continually engaged and it was obvious that this number was not viable. On checking their website it states that their flu jabs were starting on 30/9 and appointments would be sent out by letter or text. No mention of the telephone number and message that was sent out to call them. Mixed messages and confusion.**

Healthwatch Havering

Local Healthwatch across England have reported that local people, including those in the highest priority groups, cannot get vaccinated when they expected to due to a shortage of supplies.<sup>1</sup> We have also heard from some parents that, due to shortages, they have not been able to arrange an appointment for their children to have the spray alternative to the flu vaccine.

**"Caller phoning on behalf of parents, mum is 91 and father 94 with emphysema. They can't get a flu jab. They were booked to have it through the single point of access but twice the provider hasn't turned up and are now saying it's not their responsibility and to go back to the GP. The GP has said they are on the list but they have run out of stock. Caller said he is happy to pay but can't find anywhere to get it done." - Healthwatch Essex**

Policymakers should use the experiences of people not only to help improve the current flu vaccination programme but also to inform the strategy for rolling out any future COVID-19 vaccine. Our evidence indicates that policymakers should give attention to ensure:

- Communications are clear and help manage expectations
- Any appointment booking processes are accessible
- That locations of vaccine centres do not exclude those who are unable to travel.

## People's experience of contacting GP surgeries by phone

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, issues with accessing some GP surgeries by phone was a consistent theme in the feedback people share with us.

However, once the nation went into lockdown in March 2020, feedback about this issue mostly stopped. The reasons for this are unclear. However, some individuals reported not wanting to take up the time of services with what they felt were minor health issues, while others expressed fears around catching COVID-19.

<sup>1</sup> Vaccine supply issues have been reported to Healthwatch England by local Healthwatch in the following local authority areas: Birmingham, Coventry, Devon, Dorset, East Sussex, Essex, Kent, Medway, Milton Keynes, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Plymouth, Solihull, Shropshire and York.

Since mid-September 2020, however, reports of problems contacting GP surgeries by phone have increased. People are telling us that when they are trying to phone their GP surgery to make an appointment or to reorder a prescription, the line is continuously engaged, or they have had to wait in long queues for their call to be answered. Some people report having to ring many times over several days before they get through, while others say that they cannot afford the cost of waiting on hold for their call to be answered.

In some cases, the surgery has asked the person to contact them to arrange an appointment, e.g. for a flu vaccination or to discuss the results of tests.

**"I accept that these are difficult times, but I'm writing to report and register a complaint about the difficulty getting through to XX Surgery. ...I need to make a follow up telephone appointment with my GP there. When I phone there is an initial message about CV-19, then you are told to that your call is very important, and you are asked to wait while you are put through to an operator. You then wait in a queue for 10 minutes during which they say they are experiencing high call volumes, (which I accept as all their work is now going through the telephone system) ....after which either the phone goes dead, or you get a dialling tone, after which you get an engaged tone, and then the phone goes dead. Each of those processes takes a little more than 10 minutes during which you are paying for the call. I have now been trying on 3 working days. Yesterday I tried to see if I could book an appointment online: I couldn't, so I emailed the practice and was told by email that booking was now only by telephone. After phoning continually from 8.30 to 10am and then from 11 to about 11.30 I finally got through and was told that my GP was not in on Monday and that I would have to call in on Tuesday (today). I was unable to book a call for today. I have been phoning continually today from 8.30 'til 9.30, and have gone through the cycle 4 or 5 times today." - Healthwatch Oxfordshire**

Whilst there are digital alternatives to phoning GP surgeries, such as online systems that GPs use to take and triage requests for appointments, some people have reported being unable to either access or use these systems. Another option is to visit the GP surgery, but many services still don't allow people to enter the surgery to make an appointment as an infection control measure.

**"Phone lines always engaged, unable to get appointment. "We feel we should bypass the surgery and go straight to the hospital" .... Concerned that older patients are being turned away when they go to the surgery and told to phone for an appointment (then cannot get through). Reported that complaints link on website is broken (checked and found the same)." - Healthwatch East Sussex**

The impact of people not being able to get through on the phone to their GP surgery can be profound. People who are reliant on prescription medication to manage their condition face having to do without because they cannot get through to the surgery to order a repeat

prescription. Some people feel that they have no choice if they need a same day GP appointment but to contact NHS 111 or even 999 to see a medical professional:

**"My very recent interactions (or lack of interaction) with [my father's GP surgery] has left me feeling stressed and bereft of goodwill in any respect. It has left me acting out of character and moreover, it has cost the NHS probably thousands of pounds in wasted time and effort... to the extent of a paramedic having to go to my father's home after more than SIX HOURS trying to make contact with the practice. This included Holistic Care, Community District Nurses, 111, 999 and ... a 111 on call doctor. All because my 91-year-old father developed a rash and swelling of his right leg and foot." - Healthwatch Lambeth**

## People's experiences of maternity services and post-natal care

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, expectant mothers, new mothers and their partners have reported issues when using maternity services both in hospital and in the community.

### Visiting services

In the early stages of the COVID-19 response, visits to maternity services were restricted. However, since 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020, all services have been [instructed](#) to accelerate attempts to return to 'normal', and in September 2020, [new guidance](#) was issued stating that partners and visitors were now able to attend maternity units for appointments. However, we are still hearing reports from the public that some hospitals are restricting visits which is in turn having an impact on mothers, partners, and their babies.

Some women report feeling unsupported while in hospital, especially during labour and at night as their partners have not been allowed to visit or stay with them. This issue has had the most significant impact on first-time mothers and partners.

**"I had to stay in hospital on my own for 2 nights with baby. Previously [my husband] would have been allowed to stay and support me. Due to me having a c-section I found it very very hard to sort myself and a new born baby out. This was my first child, so I had no idea what I was doing." – Website feedback from Stockport**

Even when partners have been permitted to visit maternity services, due to the variation in restrictions at a local level, they are still limited in the amount of time they can spend with their partners and baby. This has caused concern for some people.

**"Currently my understanding is that she will have to go through almost all of her time in hospital without me being able to support at her side. I believe my access will be: - To be with my wife during the operation - To be with my wife for 90 minutes per day (those 90**

**minutes prescribed by the hospital rather than when they are most useful for my wife and newly born daughter)" - Healthwatch Milton Keynes**

Although some hospitals have kept visitor restrictions in place, the Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists have [stated](#) that services should clearly explain these restrictions to all parties involved. This has not always happened in practice as expectant mothers reported that they have been provided with conflicting information, leaving them confused about what to expect during routine appointments, delivery and beyond.

Women have also reported feeling particularly distressed when having to cope by themselves, especially with unexpected or emergency complications during pregnancy and labour. Not being able to be supported by their loved ones has made these experiences that much more upsetting. People have also told us that not enough consideration has been given by services for women who are alone when hearing bad news.

**"Client took daughter for her 12 week scan due to Covid, not allowed in. Client's daughter was told that the baby was no longer alive - this news she had to deal with alone. She was allowed to leave the hospital to contact partner, who was then allowed in to discuss the treatment plan, but he then had to leave. Client's daughter was left waiting for her treatment without any emotional support." - Healthwatch Kent**

### **Support in the community**

We have heard that expectant mothers have had difficulties getting in contact with community maternity services. People have told us about receiving little or no communication during the pandemic from GP, health visitor or midwife services. For example, [Healthwatch West Berkshire](#) and [Healthwatch Milton Keynes](#) highlighted that some new mothers did not know how to get in touch with midwives or how to organise baby weighing appointments during the pandemic. Parents have also reported being left people without a point of contact for support after failing to be able to contact their named midwife or GP by phone.

**" My GP surgery was never much of a fan of answering the phone before COVID-19 and now is obviously much worse. They also do not have any midwives so I have to attend a different surgery but still have to book those appointments through my GP surgery and so I spend hours every few weeks phoning and hanging up over and over and over in order to get booked in to see the midwife." - Website feedback**

People who are pregnant or parents for the first-time report feeling alone due to the lack of contact with services. Some people have told us that they have not been able to book appointments or received expected communication during pregnancy or for post-natal check-ups from community services. The lack of visits from health professionals have left women and their partners feeling isolated, anxious and unsupported in many aspects of their pregnancy, delivery



and post-natal care. The mental health implications of feeling unsupported has led to added stress and anxiety for many women and their partners or family.

**"Felt so isolated and on my own throughout this pregnancy. Haven't felt cared about and don't get anywhere near the same service as face to face. So worried about anything going wrong as I don't think anyone would pick it up or notice as it's nowhere near the same quality of service." - Healthwatch Shropshire**

The lack of visits from professionals and restrictions on services has had an impact in other ways on the experience of new mothers. Women have reported struggling to care for their babies without breastfeeding support and access to parent-baby classes in the community.

**"She is especially concerned that she had no contact from her GP or Health Visitor. She says the isolation has been 'unbelievable' and she has missed support with breast feeding in particular as her baby was tongue-tied. She was told that she could phone for advice/help but did not feel able to take this up. She says she coped because it is her second baby. While she understands staff have been redeployed (she works in healthcare) she feels the communications could have been better and especially now as lockdown restrictions change, she would like to know what plans there are to catch up with missed infant health checks and would like each mother to be proactively contacted with a wellbeing call. She is part of a breast-feeding support network and says similar experiences have been shared by 49 other mothers which has highlighted variations in service in different parts of the county." - Healthwatch Northumberland**

For those who have managed to access appointments, they were often delivered over the phone or virtually. In [Healthwatch Richmond's maternity report](#), people expressed a preference for face-to-face visits as it can be difficult to develop a rapport with maternity staff via virtual consultations. We have also heard from parents who have experienced difficulties in getting a consistent diagnosis for their baby's condition over the phone, which has then led to parents feeling confused and seeking more urgent care.

**"She has had a terrible experience...in trying to get help with the baby, several surgeries asked her for photographs of baby's face over the phone. GP said was a milk rash and would go in several days. Another GP, after baby did not improve, suggested medication in her bottle- this did not help. Dialled 111 told to take her to hospital but was sent home at 10.30 saying baby was well enough. Baby would not wake up, tried putting her in cool bath with no effect, rushed to hospital who have concluded she had Sepsis." - Healthwatch County Durham**

## People's experiences of mask exemption

Face coverings have been [required](#) in many indoor settings for some months, but some people are exempt - depending on age, physical or mental illness, impairment or disability, or if wearing one



will cause them severe distress. Local Healthwatch continue to be contacted by the public to clarify when someone should wear a face-covering and who is exempt. This feedback suggests that official information is not being promoted enough or people have difficulty understanding the requirements.

People who are exempt from wearing a face-covering can use [exemption cards](#) if they wish. Some people feel more comfortable showing something confirming that they do not have to wear a face-covering. However, Local Healthwatch have reported that many members of the public are unaware or confused about how to access the exemption cards.

We have heard positive experiences of people using exemption cards in health services. For example, one person reported that their dentist was understanding of their face mask exemption when attending their appointment, which made them feel more at ease.

However, people have also had negative experiences when not wearing a face-covering due to their exemption and trying to access support. Many people report being confused about whether there are differing exemption requirements and cards for different settings, such as shops, GP surgeries and public transport. For example, one person reported that they were refused a smear test appointment by their GP surgery, on the basis that they did not wear a face-covering, despite being medically exempt.

**"I attended the out of hours GP and as I am autistic, I am exempt from wearing a face mask. The GP was really nasty and made snide comments about if she was autistic, she would still have to wear PPE. I said if she was uncomfortable treating me, I could see an alternative doctor but she said no she would treat me. She then examined me and made me feel like a leper it was an awful experience." - Healthwatch Oxfordshire**

## Talk to us

If you have a question about the contents of this update, please either contact a member of our [Policy or Research and Insight teams](#) or email [CV19Enquiries@Healthwatch.co.uk](mailto:CV19Enquiries@Healthwatch.co.uk)