

GP Surgeries in Darlington are open for business, as we have been all through the COVID 19 pandemic.

Some services have now resumed, but practices continue to work in a very different way and will need to continue to do this for many months. We wanted to update our patients regards how we are working and how best to access your GP.

All GP Surgeries are running a 'total triage' model as instructed by NHS England, locally this is being known as 'talk before you walk'. This means that when you contact the surgery there will be some sort of triage undertaken before you are seen. In some cases this triage may be undertaken by our care navigators, trained staff who may be able to direct you to another service which will be able to meet your needs often quicker and better than a GP. The care navigator may decide that you need to speak to someone within the practice and may make you a telephone appointment with a clinically trained member of staff as appropriate. Often the problem can be dealt with over the phone or via a video consultation, however if you need a face to face appointment this will be arranged.

Often the easiest way for you to get advice from a GP is to complete an e-consult. This is an online consultation service accessed via the NHS app or your GP practice website. You are able to give us lots of information about your problem, the system performs some triage and it may advise you to self-care, a pharmacist or to contact the surgery urgently; most often the e-consult will be sent to your GP for review. The GP can often deal with the query quickly and easily- you will receive a response by the end of the next working day at the latest. You may receive this response by email, text message or a receptionist may call. If the GP needs further information they may give you a call, arrange a video consultation or a face to face appointment.

We are still being asked to use PPE (Personal protective equipment) for all encounters with patients and to thoroughly clean rooms between patients to minimise the risk of infection spreading. This means that if you have an appointment at the surgery the person you are seeing will be wearing a mask, apron and gloves. We ask that where possible you also wear some sort of face covering- this could be a simple scarf covering your face. All of these measures are to help protect our patients and our staff. Keeping staff well is so important for us to be able to run a safe service for you. Unfortunately all of these measures take extra time and so we are unable to see as many people face to face as we did previously, the new consultation methods such as online, video and telephone help to maintain access to services safely.

GPs are very aware that a number of people may feel daunted by the new ways of working. For example people without access to online or video consultations, or those with communication difficulties. We are trying our best to enable access and we would welcome feedback from anyone who has had any problems so that we can improve. Translation services are available for video and telephone consultations (including for sign language) and if digital access is an issue we can manage without that.

Prescriptions can be requested via the NHS App, SystmOnline or via posting a paper request into your practice. Please do not phone for prescription requests as we need to protect our phone lines so that patients can access help when they need. We are sending all prescriptions electronically to community pharmacies. Community pharmacies have worked incredibly hard through the pandemic and continue to experience significant pressure- please treat them as the treasured resource they are.

Most of our services have restarted now, with a few exceptions. Some minor surgery, joint injections, breathing tests and private medicals for example are still not up and running, we are awaiting national guidance on this. You may be contacted to come in for monitoring tests for an existing condition and we would encourage you to attend for this, we know that underlying conditions increase the risk of a bad outcome from COVID 19, particularly if this is not well controlled. We also know that being overweight is an important risk factor for COVID 19, if you would like help losing weight- arrange to talk to one of our health care assistants who can offer advice and support.

We also ask for some understanding that the whole health system is still under significant pressure. The focus is still on managing emergency, urgent and serious problems. For some routine problems there may be significant waits for treatment. We understand that this will be very difficult for a large number of people and will do our best to support you with this. Our patients have made very sensible use of the health system over the last four months and that really has enabled us to save lives. We will need your continued support and patience over the coming months.

It is very important to contact your GP surgery with any worrying symptoms. We are worried that many people have put this off through the pandemic and we are seeing people present very late with cancers and other conditions- the earlier we identify a problem, the more likely we can treat it.

We are looking towards the winter and preparing for an influenza vaccination programme that we have never seen before. Due to the need to maintain social distancing and that those who need a flu vaccine are vulnerable to COVID 19 we are looking at a totally new way of delivering the vaccination. As 11 practices we are working closely on an at-scale project and we will share more details with our patients as soon as we have plans confirmed. It has never been so important to have your flu jab and so we would encourage all those eligible to take up the offer of a vaccination this year.

The last thing we need is a second wave with a repeat of lockdown and more pressure on health services. **THE PANDEMIC IS NOT OVER.** Please, please continue to be sensible, continue social distancing of 2 metres where possible and wear masks when in public places such as supermarkets if you can. Wash your hands- often.

I want to end by saying a huge thank you for all of the support our practices have received from the public and the dedication of those who have followed Government guidelines despite significant personal sacrifice. To all staff working in GP practices- every single one of you have shown huge



commitment, bravery and compassion through exceptional circumstances- thank you. To all key workers (including volunteers) who have looked after our most vulnerable in society and kept our communities going- you have our utmost respect and gratitude. We are not out of the woods yet, but I am so proud to be working in Darlington with such a fantastic team and community.

Dr Amanda Riley

Clinical Director of Darlington Primary Care Network.