



advice and support for older age

**Independent
Age**

Factsheet

Health difficulties: how to cope with changing needs

As we age, we're more likely to experience ill-health or disability. This factsheet explains what help and support is available from your local council and the NHS.

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Independent Age provides advice to help people claim benefits, access social care and stay independent at home. Our local volunteers provide friendship visits and calls for lonely older people. To find out how Independent Age can help you, call us FREE on **0800 319 6789** or visit **independentage.org**



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1. Health difficulties

Many older people lead full, active and healthy lives, although some people will face health difficulties – either short-term illnesses or long-term conditions. Health difficulties can be caused by different reasons, not all of which are related to your age. Physical illnesses, such as arthritis or a stroke, can affect your mobility, while mental health difficulties, such as memory loss or disorientation, can make it more difficult for you to go out alone.

However, there may be help and advice available, as outlined in this factsheet, which can assist with your health problems and may go some way towards making you feel better or more able to cope with daily activities.

2. Help to protect your health

The NHS offers a range of services to help us protect ourselves from illness, keep us as healthy as possible and provide treatment when we're unwell. This section covers some of the support that is available when you face health difficulties.

Your local pharmacy

A pharmacist can offer a range of services to help you to monitor and maintain your health, such as:

- advice on treating minor symptoms such as a stomach upset or sore throat
- organising your repeat prescriptions
- annual flu vaccinations
- reviewing your medications
- advice on living a healthy lifestyle, including diet and weight management.

Some pharmacies offer screening for conditions such as diabetes or allergies. They may also offer blood pressure checks and cholesterol checks.

Help to stop smoking

We all know how bad smoking is for your health, but the good news is it's never too late to quit. By stopping smoking, your breathing, circulation and fitness will improve. Your chances of heart disease and stroke will also fall.

The NHS offers free local support to help people quit smoking. A trained adviser will help you put a plan into action to stop smoking and provide one-to-one or group support. Your adviser will also explain the range of nicotine replacement products and other stop smoking medications that are available. For further advice or to find your local service,

contact the NHS Quit Smoking service (0300 123 1044, smokefree.nhs.uk).

Reducing alcohol consumption

Having a glass of alcohol can be one of life's pleasures, but drinking too much can affect your physical and mental health. It can cause insomnia and anxiety, and increase the risk of falls and accidents, incontinence and depression. In more severe cases, heavy drinking can lead to dementia.

If you think you have a problem with alcohol, talk to your GP and ask about being referred to a support programme.

If you are concerned about your own or someone else's drinking, contact Alcohol Concern (0300 123 1110, alcoholconcern.org.uk) to discuss safe drinking limits and how to get help and support. If alcohol is affecting your life and relationships, you can contact Alcoholics Anonymous (0800 9177 650, alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk) for confidential advice and support.

3. Primary care services

Your GP

Your general practice is your first port of call for NHS care for any health difficulties. You may be given treatment or referred for more specialist advice. If you need non-urgent treatment and are referred to a hospital, you should be offered a choice of locations so you can choose which is most convenient for you.

Good to know

Before you register with a local GP surgery, you may want to check how it compares with other local practices. Ask friends who live locally for their opinions or read online reviews on NHS Choices ([nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)).

Footcare

As we age, the skin on our feet becomes thinner and we may develop pain and stiffness in our feet or ankles. However, foot pain and discomfort is not an inevitable part of ageing. Good foot care can help with mobility problems and also reduce the risk of falls.

If you have problems with your feet because of ageing, diabetes, osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis, you should be a priority for NHS foot care services. Make an appointment to see your GP, and ask them to refer you to a podiatrist (also called a chiropodist).

Podiatry is available free on the NHS, but services will vary depending on where you live.

If you're not eligible for footcare from the NHS, you will need to arrange to see a podiatrist privately. You can search online on the NHS Choices website ([nhs.uk/Service-Search](https://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search)) or call NHS Direct (111).

Good to know

Some local Age UKs (0800 169 6565, ageuk.org.uk) offer a toenail clipping service or information about local chiropody services.

Eye care

It is important that you have your eyes checked regularly. An eye test will check the health of your eyes and could identify an eye condition before it significantly affects your eyesight. You're entitled to a free eye test every two years if you are aged 60 to 69 or have diabetes or glaucoma. If you're 70 or over, you can get a free eye test every year. To find opticians in your area, visit the NHS Choices website (nhs.uk) or contact NHS Direct (111).

If you can't leave your home because of ill health or a disability, you may be eligible for an NHS eye test at home. A qualified optometrist will visit you at home to carry out the sight test. Call NHS Direct (111) to find out more.

If an ophthalmologist (an eye specialist) has diagnosed your sight loss and completed a Certificate of Vision Impairment, you can register with your council as sight impaired (also called partially sighted) or severely sight impaired (also called blind). You may get some services at reduced rates. For more information about sight loss, contact the Royal National Institute for the Blind (0303 123 9999, rnib.org.uk).

Dental care

Having an annual check-up with a dentist can help you to keep your teeth and gums healthy, even if you have false teeth.

You have to pay for dental care unless you qualify for help from the NHS Low Income Scheme (see chapter 9) for more information). If you don't qualify, dental costs will vary

depending on the type of treatment you need. Call the NHS dental services helpline (0300 330 1348) for more information.

To find an NHS dentist, contact NHS Direct (111), or visit the NHS Choices website ([nhs.uk/Service-Search](https://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search)). If you can't find a dentist who accepts NHS patients, you may have to go on a waiting list or pay privately for treatment.

If you have a mobility problem that means you find it difficult to visit your dentist, you may be able to arrange for a dentist to treat you in your own home. Contact NHS England (0300 311 22 33, [england.nhs.uk](https://www.england.nhs.uk)) and ask for information about community dental services in your area.

4. Services in the community

Community nurses

A community or district nurse can treat you for minor ailments in your local GP surgery or at home. Community nurses may specialise in a particular area such as mental health, skin breakdown or continence. You need to be referred to your community nursing service by your GP or a hospital.

Physiotherapists

Physiotherapists use exercises and manual therapy to help people to regain movement and relieve pain in joints, bones or soft tissues. For example, a physiotherapist might work with someone who has had a stroke to help them walk independently again. Some physiotherapists use additional therapies such as massage and acupuncture. You can be referred to a physiotherapist by a GP or hospital, or in some areas you can contact an NHS physiotherapy directly. You can also pay to see a physiotherapist privately. The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy can help you find a local physiotherapist (020 7306 6666, csp.org.uk).

Occupational therapists

An occupational therapist (OT) works with people who are ill, recovering from an illness, or have a chronic disability. They can advise you and refer you to receive disability equipment and home adaptations. OTs may be based in a hospital or in the social services department of your local council and you can be referred for an OT assessment by a health professional or a social worker.

5. Care after a hospital stay

Intermediate care and reablement services are free, short-term packages of care offered to some people after leaving hospital. The services aim to:

- help someone recover faster from illness or an operation
- avoid re-admission to hospital
- help people regain their independence or skills
- prevent or delay a move into a care home.

These services are free and usually provided for up to six weeks. They aim to increase your independence so that you don't need on-going support. Carers will help you do daily tasks and regain skills rather than doing them for you. For example, they may support you to start washing, dressing, shopping, cooking and walking independently again. Equipment may also be provided to help you move around your home or complete tasks more easily.

Intermediate care and reablement services can be provided at home, in hospital or in a care home. It may be provided by NHS staff or by social care professionals such as social workers or professional carers.

Intermediate care or reablement services aren't right for everyone. You will need to be referred to your local service by your hospital, social worker or GP. Before you start receiving the service you should have a meeting to agree what you'd like to achieve. You should be given a care plan which should be reviewed regularly, and at the end of the care package. If necessary, you may be offered on-going support. You may need to pay for this.

6. Staying healthy at home

An assessment of your needs

If you need help with daily living tasks at home, contact your council's social services department and ask for a needs assessment, also known as a care assessment. This will look at the types of care, support, aids or home adaptations that you might benefit from.

If the council agree that your needs meet national eligibility criteria, they can organise support services directly from social services or through another organisation, such as a private home care agency. The council may make a financial contribution to your care if your income and savings are low.

If you care for someone who has physical or mental health difficulties, you are entitled to an assessment of your needs as a carer. This is known as a carer's assessment. The assessment might result in more services to help the person you look after, or services to support you in your role as a carer. Contact your local social services to arrange an assessment.

The contact details for social services will be on the council's website or in your local telephone directory. For more information about needs assessments, see our factsheet **Assessment and care services from your local council in England** (0800 319 6789, independentage.org).

Adaptations and specialist equipment

Specialised equipment or home adaptations can make it easier for you to carry out daily tasks or move about.

An occupational therapist (OT), physiotherapist or community nurse may assess you to see what could help. Suitable adaptations or aids could include:

- handrails next to the bath, toilet, stairs or front door

- a community alarm system so you can call for help in an emergency
- specially designed or adapted furniture
- a stairlift
- ramps
- a walk-in shower.

Disability equipment that costs less than £1,000 should be provided free by your council if you're assessed as needing it. If you need more substantial home adaptations, your council has a duty help arrange for the work to be carried out, but they are not obliged to fit the adaptation themselves. This may mean they just advise you on a suitable company that will provide the equipment. However, the council can't say they don't have enough resources as a reason for not providing the help it has agreed you need.

Good to know

If you have a disability and an occupational therapist has recommended an essential but expensive home adaptation, you may be eligible for a Disabled Facilities Grant. The grant is means-tested and, if you're eligible, can cover work up to £30,000.

A Home Improvement Agency (HIA) can help older or disabled people arrange, find funding for and carry out home repairs, improvements and adaptations. To get this help, you must be a home owner on a low income or a private tenant.

Find out if there is a HIA in your area by contacting the national charity Foundations (0300 124 0315; foundations.uk.com). If there isn't one, ask your local council or advice centre about what help is available.

For more information about getting specialist equipment, see our factsheet **Choosing disability equipment** (0800 319 6789, independentage.org).

For more information about Disabled Facilities Grants and adapting your home, see our factsheet **Adapting your home to stay independent** (0800 319 6789, independentage.org).

Mobility equipment

If you have difficulty walking, social services can assess you as needing a walking stick, a walker or a wheelchair (either manual or automatic). Electric mobility scooters aren't available from your local council social services. However, it may be possible to get an electric scooter through the Motability scheme (0300 456 4566, motability.co.uk) or by raising the money through a charitable grant.

For more information about applying for charitable grants, see our factsheet **Grants from charities for people on a low income** (0800 319 6789, independentage.org).

Avoiding falls

Many of us worry about falling. A fall can cause serious injury and affect your confidence. However, many falls can be prevented by taking simple measures.

- Take regular exercise – such as walking, swimming or gardening – to keep your muscles strong and improve your balance. Your GP may be able to recommend strength and balance exercises or local exercise classes.
- Eat a balanced diet with calcium-rich food such as cheese and milk to keep your bones strong. Vitamin D (found in oily fish like sardines and tuna) can also help the body absorb calcium. Your GP or pharmacist can give advice on your nutrition and diet.
- Ask your GP or pharmacist for an annual medication review. The side-effects of some medication might increase your chance of having a fall. Let your GP know if a medicine is making you feel dizzy or unwell.
- Get your sight tested regularly (see page 7)

- Wear well-fitted shoes and avoid open-backed slippers or loose-fitting trousers that might cause you to trip
- Keep your home well-lit, clutter-free and use non-slip mats under any rugs. Repair frayed carpet edges.
- Organise your house so you don't need to climb, stretch or bend too much. For example, store frequently used items in an accessible cupboard or fit a letterbox cage so you don't have to bend down to pick up post.
- Consider installing a community alarm system. This is a pendant or wristband you wear with a button to press to call for help if you fall or feel unwell. For more information, see our factsheet **Telecare and Telehealth: What it is and how to get it** (0800 319 6789, independentage.org).

7. Help with transport

If you have mobility problems such as unsteadiness when you walk, you may find it difficult to use public transport. There are alternative ways to get around more easily.

Community transport schemes

Schemes such as Dial-a-ride can provide door-to-door transport for older or disabled people. In some areas, taxis or community buses that can transport people with disabilities. Contact your local council or Scope (0808 800 3333, scope.org.uk/support/disabled-people/local/about) to find out what's available in your local area.

Volunteer transport schemes

In some areas, there are schemes that arrange transport by trained volunteers who have had security checks. Contact your local Age UK (0800 169 6565, ageuk.org.uk), Royal Voluntary Service (0845 608 0122, royalvoluntaryservices.org.uk), or British Red Cross (0344 871 11 11, redcross.org.uk) to see if there's a scheme in your area. Or have a look in your telephone directory or local library.

Blue Badge scheme

If you drive a car and have mobility problems, you may be eligible for a Blue Badge from your local council. A Blue Badge gives you access to priority parking so you can park closer to where you need to go. You can also use it if you're a passenger in a car. You can get information about the Blue Badge scheme from your local council or by visiting gov.uk/apply-blue-badge.

Freedom passes

Older and disabled people are entitled to a free annual bus pass, sometimes called a freedom pass.

In England, you're eligible for an older person's bus pass when you reach state pension age. The pass gives you free off-peak travel on local buses anywhere in the country. Some local councils may offer free travel outside off-peak hours, or free or reduced price tram or rail travel within the local area. Ask your local pass provider (which could be your local council). Visit gov.uk/apply-for-elderly-person-bus-pass for more information on free bus travel and a list of pass providers.

8. Support for people with a long-term condition

It can be hard to live with a health condition for a long time. You may have developed your own ways of coping with the pain, discomfort or inconvenience of your condition. However, there are a number of services and charities that can offer practical and emotional support for people living with long-term conditions.

Cancer

60% of the people living with cancer are over 65. Having or surviving cancer can also lead to anxiety, depression and feelings of loss in older age. Macmillan Cancer Support (0808 808 00 00, macmillan.org.uk) offers information and advice about cancer diagnosis, getting support and what to expect from treatment. They also offer emotional support via their helpline and online forums.

Arthritis

Approximately 10 million people in the UK have arthritis. This can involve pain, stiffness and inflammation in and around the joints which can restrict movement. The Arthritis Care helpline (0808 800 4050, arthritiscare.org.uk) offers information and advice about managing pain, treatments, exercise and diet and how to manage the emotional side-effects of arthritis.

Stroke

There are over 1.2 million people in the UK who have survived a stroke. Stopping smoking, drinking less alcohol, eating a healthy diet, exercise and managing health conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes can all help reduce the risk of having a stroke.

If you or a family member or friend has had a stroke, the Stroke Association (0303 3033 100, stroke.org.uk) offers information on how to find services, rehabilitation and treatment and how make lifestyle changes to reduce stroke risk.

Dementia

It is estimated that there will be 850,000 people with dementia by 2015 in the UK. Dementia UK (0800 888 6678, dementiauk.org) provides information and practical advice to people and their families about dementia. They help people and their families adapt to changes in their lives that happen after a diagnosis of dementia.

Alzheimer's Society (0300 222 1122, alzheimers.org.uk) offers information and support to anyone who is concerned about any type of dementia.

Diabetes

Diabetes is a common long-term condition: 3.3 million people in the UK are diagnosed with it. Diabetes UK (0345 123 2399, diabetes.org.uk) can provide people with diabetes with information, advice and even just someone to talk to.

Parkinson's

Over 120,000 people in the UK have Parkinson's Disease, which is a progressive neurological condition that affects movement, speech, energy, eyes, bowels and bladder. The Parkinson's UK helpline (0808 800 0303, parkinsons.org.uk) can give you information and help from advisers and some specialist Parkinson's nurses about medical issues, benefits, social care, health and emotional support.

Continence issues

It is estimated that up to six million adults in the UK currently experience some form of incontinence. Incontinence is not an inevitable result of growing older. If you experience incontinence, visit your GP to see if there is a medical reason for it. You can ask your GP to refer you to see a continence advisor, who will be able to give you specific advice about ways of reducing and managing incontinence. Your condition might be improved by treatment, exercise, advice, training, suitable continence aids or adaptations to your home.

For more information and advice about continence issues, contact the Bladder and Bowel Foundation (0845 345 0165, bladderandbowelfoundation.org).

9. Financial help with health costs

Prescription costs

If you're 60 or over, you're entitled to free prescriptions. On the back of the prescription form there is a box to tick to say you are over 60. The chemist may ask you to show proof that you are over 60.

Eye care costs

You're entitled to free NHS eye tests if you're 60 or over or have certain health conditions, such as diabetes or glaucoma. Tell your optician or the receptionist if you're eligible for a free eye test. You will be asked to sign a NHS Sight Test form and may need to bring proof of age.

If your eye test shows you need glasses, you will be given a prescription which you can take to any optician or supplier to get your glasses. You can get an NHS optical voucher to help towards with the cost of your glasses if:

- you're eligible for a NHS complex lens voucher (ask your optician about this), or
- you receive Pension Guarantee Credit, or - you're named on a HC2 or HC3 form (for help paying health costs).

For more information, ask your optician or contact the RNIB (0303 123 9999, rnib.org.uk).

Dental care costs

You're eligible for free NHS dental treatment if you get Pension Guarantee Credit. You may also be eligible for help with dental costs if you're on a low income (see below).

There are maximum charges for NHS dental care; a complex course of treatment is currently £233.70 and other more

straightforward treatments like check-ups, fillings and extractions cost either £19.70 or £53.90.

NHS Low Income Scheme

If you don't get Pension Guarantee Credit, you may still be entitled to help toward the costs of dental treatment, sight tests, glasses and fares to hospital if you're on a low income and your savings are below £16,000 (or £23,250 if you live in a care home).

To claim this help, you have to fill in form HC1. This is available at your local Jobcentre Plus or hospital, or your GP surgery, dentist or optician may have copies. You can also call the Help with Health Costs line on 0300 123 0849 and ask for a HC1 form.

If you're eligible, you'll be sent you a certificate showing what help you can receive. An HC2 Certificate means you'll get help towards all of your health costs. If you receive an HC3 Certificate, then you qualify for partial help. The certificate lasts for a year. If you've paid NHS charges in error, call the call the Help with Health Costs line on 0300 123 0849 to find out how to get a refund.

Paying for travel to hospital

If you don't need an ambulance but find it difficult to pay for the costs of travel to hospital, you may be eligible for help from the Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme (HTCS). If you need a carer with you, they may be eligible for help too.

If you get Pension Guarantee Credit or other qualifying benefits, you will get your travel costs to hospital paid in full.

If you're on a low income, you may be entitled to a full or partial reimbursement of your travel costs.

Ask at the hospital reception about how to get a refund. You'll need to provide evidence of the benefits you receive or show an HC2 or HC3 certificate.

To do...

For more information on help with health costs, call 0300 330 1343 or visit [nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcosts/Pages/help-with-health-costs.aspx](https://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcosts/Pages/help-with-health-costs.aspx).

Financial help for War Pensioners

If you're a War Pensioner, you may be entitled to additional financial help with NHS treatment and other needs. Contact Veterans UK (0808 1914 2 18, veterans-uk.info) for more information.

10. Health tips to remember

These tips may be familiar, but it's worth remembering that small changes can make you feel better.

Exercise as often as you can

A little bit of exercise like a short walk or a gentle swim can tone your muscles, strengthen joints and make you feel better about yourself.

Go out and socialise

Seeing friends and doing new things can make you feel good, reduce feelings of isolation and can take your mind off health worries.

Eat well

Eating healthily, little and often, can help keep your weight within a normal range and give you plenty of energy.

Drink plenty of fluids

Even if you're not thirsty, it's important to top up your fluid intake as it's easy to become dehydrated. Having a drink of water, milk or juice every time you eat, for example, can make sure you are drinking enough which will give you more energy.

Get plenty of sleep

A good night's sleep is sometimes hard to achieve but is important for your wellbeing. A regular bedtime routine can help, as can reading a book or playing gentle music just before you go to bed in a suitably dark and quiet room.

This factsheet has been put together by Independent Age's expert advisers. It is not a full explanation of the law and is aimed at people aged over 60.

If you need this information in an alternative format (such as large-print or audio cd), call us on 0800 319 6789 or email advice@independentage.org.

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We will use your feedback to help us plan for changes to our publications in the future. Thank you.

Supporting Independent Age

If you have found this information helpful and would like to support our work, there are lots of ways you can help:

- get fit - run, walk or cycle in aid of Independent Age
- take part in our annual raffle
- donate in memory of a loved one
- remember Independent Age in your will and benefit from our Free Wills offer to supporters.

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