

# Understanding the GP Appointments System - A Guide for Patients (January 2025)

## Introduction

This guide is intended to help you understand how the appointments system works at our practice so that you can be seen most effectively. Our aim is to see any patient who has a health problem within a timespan that is appropriate for that problem. As a practice we undertake more than 93,000 clinical contacts in a year for our population of more than 18,000 registered patients. Some of these consultations are for new illnesses whilst others are for continuing problems, with more than 90% of all medical care being provided in general practice. It can therefore be a massive challenge to match the needs of individual patients to the supply of appointments.

## Appointment Types

We have several different types of appointments aimed at meeting the needs of the majority of patients:

- **Telephone Appointments.** A telephone call can often save time for both patients and doctors, and we are developing telephone consultations as a means of improving efficiency.
- **Face to face**
- **Text / Email**
- **Advanced Care Practitioners (ACP)/Paramedic Practitioners (PP).** This team supports the duty doctor team by seeing those patients who have medical issues which need to be seen on the day.
- **Nurse, Health Care Assistants (HCA) and General Practice Assistants (GPA).** This team deal with blood tests, smears, dressings, injections and monitoring of long-term health conditions.
- **First Contact Physio (FCP).** FCPs are highly trained in musculoskeletal conditions.
- **Clinical Pharmacists.** Provide medication reviews, annual reviews for some long-term conditions, such as diabetes, asthma and coronary heart disease.
- **Adult and Children Mental Health Nurses.** Mental health practitioners who can support complex mental health issues.
- **Home visits.** Given that a doctor/ACP/PP can see three or four patients in surgery in the time that it takes to do a single visit, home visits are restricted to patients who are genuinely unable to get out of their home.

## Making Appointments

All routine or on the day requests for a GP appointment are to be requested via the online consultation tool which is available on the practice website:- [St James Medical Centre & Orchard Medical Centre, Taunton - St James Medical Centre Taunton doctors surgery](#). The practice can also send a SMS ( text) with a link attached to patients who request it. Patients are encouraged to complete the online consultation themselves as they can give detailed information, in their own words, however if a

patient is unable to do this the reception team will complete this for them. If a patient calls the surgery, they will be asked to go online, or reception can complete it for the patient.

All requests are triaged by a team of duty doctors and the most appropriate action will be taken. This may be:

- Signposting to appropriate service/information
- Appointment with an Advanced Care Practitioner, Paramedic Practitioner, First Contact Physio, Clinical Pharmacist, Adult or Child Mental Health Nurse or a GP - this may be an on the day appointment or a routine appointment
- If you are being booked for an on the day appointment, the GPA will contact you via telephone. Please ensure that you keep your phone handy, so that we can reach you and make timely appointments.

### **Top tips to help us to help you get the most out of the Appointment System**

1. **Is it 'urgent'?** Please don't request an urgent (same day) appointment unless you consider your problem to be medically urgent. Please add relevant information onto your online request. Inappropriate requests for same day appointments mean that it is more difficult for patients with genuine urgent problems to be seen.
2. **Think ahead.** If you have a long-term medical condition or take regular medication then you will need to be seen periodically for review, usually every six or twelve months. Please try to book these review appointments well in advance. Appointments can usually be made up to 12 weeks in advance for the nursing team.
3. **Turn up ... or cancel.** Please don't miss an appointment that you have booked. This is wasted time that could have been used for another patient. If you can't make an appointment or need to change it then let us know. Please also ensure that you arrive at the practice prior to your appointment, as arriving late may result in you not being seen.
4. **Can anyone else help?** Before you make an appointment, please think about whether there are any other services that might be more appropriate. For example, remember that community pharmacists are trained to give advice about minor health problems and answer any questions about your medicines and treatment. The NHS 111 system is also available to guide you to appropriate sources of advice. This can be accessed via [Get help for your symptoms - NHS 111](#).
5. **What's the problem?** Understandably many people are reluctant to tell a receptionist about the reason that they want to see a doctor. However, our reception staff are more likely to be able to guide you in the right direction if you give them a rough idea about your problem. All our staff have a responsibility to treat your information confidentially, and we take this very seriously.
6. **Continuing care.** If you have an ongoing problem then please, if possible, try to see the same doctor for each appointment. This helps both you and the doctor as you do not have to repeat your medical symptoms or issues. This also enables the doctor to build up a better picture of what is going on.

7. **Multiple problems.** A routine appointment is 15 minutes. During that time the doctor needs to read up on your records, collect you from the waiting room, deal with your problem(s), and write up your records. If you have more than one problem then it may not be possible to deal with them in a single appointment.
8. **Be patient.** Please understand that the receptionists, GPAs, and clinical staff are trying to meet the needs of thousands of patients, each of whom is very important. Although we want to offer personal, patient-centred care, we are often stretched to the limit. Please try to be understanding if things are not completely to your satisfaction.

### **Top Tips to Help You Get the Best from Your Appointment**

Before your appointment it is often helpful to think about what you want to tell the healthcare professional. This should mean that when you are speaking to them you remember to tell them everything you are worried about, or feel is relevant to help the healthcare professional help you.

Before your next appointment, think about the following:

- What are you really worried about?
- What symptoms do you want to tell the healthcare professional about?
- Are you clear what you want from your healthcare professional? Perhaps a diagnosis, treatment, referral or just advice.
- Do you have any beliefs or concerns? For example, are you worried that your symptom may be cancer?
- Do you have any expectations? Do you think the healthcare professional should prescribe you medication? Or refer you for a specialist opinion?

Be honest with the healthcare professional. It is important to share the main reason you are there at the start of your appointment. If you are embarrassed, don't be, the healthcare professional is there to help and won't be shocked.

If you take any medications not prescribed by St James Medical Centre, please bring a list of the medications with you.

Please also remember that appointments have a limited duration. All healthcare professionals are highly trained and experienced to be able to assess your symptoms from the history you give, and any examination required. However, it becomes difficult if you bring more than one or two problems to the appointment especially if they are new and complex problems. If you have several things you wish to discuss, please include this on the online consultation to enable the GP triage team to assess and book the most appropriate appointment for you. Please be prepared to come back for the less pressing problems at another time.

You may find it useful to write down your questions as it is easy to forget once in the consultation. This can avoid coming out of the consultation and remembering something you really wanted to tell them.

If you don't feel able to take it all in, you may like to bring someone along with you. They don't have to stay for any examination but may help you remember what the healthcare professional said.