Health and healthcare

Arriving in a new country is a very busy time and there are a lot of changes to go through. For example, there are differences in food, weather and customs to cope with. In this type of situation, with all its stresses, you can find yourself paying less attention than usual to your health.

Existing health problems can also be made worse by the effects of adjusting to unfamiliar food, a different climate and the emotional strains of being away from home. It can be easy to concentrate on your studies and forget about taking care of yourself. This section aims to give advice on looking after yourself, as well as practical information on how to obtain medical treatment. It also explains students’ entitlement to free medical treatment under the UK state health system.

How the medical system is organised in the UK

GP’s (Doctor’s) Surgery or Health Centre

This is your first point of contact for medical treatment. UK residents register with a Health Centre or GP’s Surgery. Most illnesses and other problems can be treated by the GP, but if you need to see a specialist, the GP will refer you to an appropriate hospital department (see below). As well as consultations with a Doctor, most GP’s Surgeries and Health Centres provide a range of community health services: for example vaccinations, women’s health clinics, services for parents of young children, family planning, contraception and sexual health. GP Surgeries and Health Centres are normally open during the daytime and early evening. However, they normally have an answering-machine message about where you can get help when the Surgery or Health Centre is closed. Your local hospital may also have an NHS Walk-in Clinic.

Hospital

If your GP refers you to hospital for treatment, you will usually be given an appointment to see a consultant (specialist doctor). Depending on the medical problem, you may be treated as an in-patient (where you are admitted to a ward and stay there overnight or longer) or as an out-patient (where you visit the hospital for an appointment).

If you think you need to see a specialist, you should approach your GP first and ask her or him to refer you.

Accident and Emergency (A&E) Departments

Some (but not all) hospitals have Accident and Emergency departments. These departments are open 24 hours a day.

If you need immediate medical assistance (for example, because of an accident), telephone 999. The call is free including from mobile phones. An operator will ask you which emergency service you need (Fire, Police or Ambulance). For urgent medical assistance ask for the ambulance service. Be ready to tell the emergency services what has happened and exactly where you are, especially the street name.

Once you are connected to the Emergency Medical Dispatcher, she or he will ask you questions about the condition of the patient and may offer advice on what to do until the ambulance arrives. If the person is badly injured and needs to go to hospital, an ambulance will be dispatched to take the person to a hospital Accident and Emergency (A&E) department.

If you need urgent treatment, but you are well enough to travel, you should make your own way by bus or taxi to an Accident and Emergency (A&E) department, or ask a friend to take you.

There are no fees for Accident and Emergency services (as long as you are not admitted as an in-patient and do not access follow-up treatment), and you do not have to have paid the immigration health surcharge to use them.

Note: You should only use A&E Departments for emergency treatment for serious illness or injury.