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Help us help you: NHS urges public to get care when they need it

 25 April 2020

- [Patient care \(https://www.england.nhs.uk/news/?filter-keyword=&filter-category=patient-care\)](https://www.england.nhs.uk/news/?filter-keyword=&filter-category=patient-care)

The head of the NHS has today launched a major new drive to persuade the public to seek the urgent care and treatment they need.

NHS chief executive Sir Simon Stevens warned that delays in getting treatment due to coronavirus fears pose a long term risk to people's health.

The plea comes alongside new findings that four in ten people are too concerned about being a burden on the NHS to seek help from their GP.

Seeking medical help is one of the four reasons that people can safely leave home, in line with government guidance.

And Sir Simon stressed that the NHS is still there for patients without coronavirus who need urgent and emergency services for stroke, heart attack, and other killer conditions.

While NHS staff have worked hard to put in place measures allowing people to access care safely – such as splitting services into Covid and non-Covid – attendances at Accident and Emergency departments are so far on course to be one million lower this April than last.

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Some leading clinicians including the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and medical health charities such as the British Heart Foundation and Stroke Association have expressed concerns that people are risking their long-term health, and their lives, by delaying getting the help they need.

A new public information campaign – including digital adverts, posters and social media featuring NHS staff – will be rolled out next week to persuade people to contact their GP or the 111 service if they have urgent care needs – or 999 in emergencies – and to attend hospital if they are told they should.

As well as encouraging people to seek help for urgent health needs, over the coming weeks the NHS will take steps to encourage people to use other vital services – such as cancer screening and care, maternity appointments and mental health support – as they usually would, by demonstrating how frontline teams are delivering them safely.

NHS chief executive Sir Simon Stevens said: “While NHS staff have pulled out all the stops to deal with coronavirus they have also worked hard to ensure that patients who don’t have COVID-19 can safely access essential services.

“So whether you or loved one have the symptoms of a heart attack or stroke, are a parent worried about their child or have concerns about conditions such as cancer you should seek help in the way you always would.

Ignoring problems can have serious consequences – now or in the future.”

As part of the NHS’ rapid response to the greatest public health challenge in its history, hospitals have freed up more than 33,000 beds, the equivalent of 50 new hospitals, over the last few weeks.

An unprecedented deal with the independent sector has put their 8,000 beds and 20,000 staff at the NHS’ disposal, and seven Nightingale hospitals have been rapidly set up around the country, providing over 3,500 more beds to help local hospitals ensure all those who need care can get it.

This significant increase in capacity, combined with effective social distancing by the public slowing the spread of the virus, has meant that the NHS has so far successfully been able to meet everyone’s need, with capacity to spare.

Over the coming weeks the NHS will be working with top doctors and nurses, as well as patient groups, to highlight how local health teams have adapted to the global coronavirus pandemic, and to reassure the public that it is safe to access care – including scheduled appointments, vaccinations and maternity services.

Professor Russell Viner, President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health said: “If your child is unwell the NHS is here for you. If you’re worried, please get in touch with your GP, use NHS 111, or in serious cases come and see us in hospital. Children are unlikely to be unwell with Covid, but they do get sick and when this happens we want to see them.”

Professor Carrie MacEwen, Chair of The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, said: “We are very concerned that patients may not be accessing the NHS for care because they either don’t want to be a burden or because they are fearful about catching the virus.

“Everyone should know that the NHS is still open for business and it is vitally important that if people have serious conditions or concerns they seek help. This campaign is an important step in ensuring that people are encouraged to get the care they need when they need it.”

In April 2019 there were over 2.1million attendances at A&E departments in England; data published by Public Health England suggests that attendances over this month are around 50% lower.

The British Heart Foundation earlier in the month also reported a fall in 50% in the number of people attending with heart attacks, raising concerns that people are not getting the potentially life-saving care that is still available.

Dr Sonya Babu-Narayan, Associate Medical Director at the British Heart Foundation, said: “Whilst many things right now are uncertain, one thing that we can be certain of is that heart attacks kill. If people put off seeking urgent medical help when they are having heart attack symptoms they put their life at risk.

“Also vitally important are the many thousands of people in the UK living with existing heart conditions, like heart failure, who will also need to be able to access care immediately if their condition worsens.

“Our message is clear, do not delay seeking help. If you are experiencing symptoms of a heart attack call 999 immediately. If you have a heart condition which is getting worse don’t delay in seeking medical advice and help. You are not a burden, the NHS remains ready to treat you.”

Juliet Bouverie, Chief Executive of the Stroke Association, said: “It’s hugely reassuring to know how hard NHS staff are working to ensure that everyone gets the urgent care they need, despite the huge pressures that coronavirus has imposed.



“If you suspect that you, or someone you’re with, may be having a stroke don’t hesitate to seek medical help. Think FAST: Face, Arms, Speech – it’s Time to call 999.

“A stroke is a medical emergency as is a mini-stroke. Don’t dismiss it as ‘just a funny-turn’. The quicker you’re diagnosed and treated for a stroke, the better your chances of making a good recovery.”

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