

Prison – Going in

Going into prison can be a very difficult time. It can also be a difficult time for your carers, relatives or friends who may be supporting you. There is help and support for you and your loved ones. This factsheet looks at the types of prisons in England, and what happens when you first go in. This factsheet is for people living with mental illness who are in prison. And their carers, relatives and friends.

Key Points.

- There are different types of prisons and prisoners. Prisons have different categories and privileges, based on your risk and behaviour.
- There are different prisons for men and women. There are not as many prisons for women.
- There are also prisons, and other facilities, for younger people.
- When you first arrive in prison, reception staff will assess you. This is an important time for you to tell staff about any health problems you have, and any medication you are taking.

This factsheet covers:

1. [What are the different categories of prison and prisoner?](#)
2. [What are the different types of prisoner?](#)
3. [What happens when I first arrive in prison?](#)
4. [What else do I need to know when I arrive?](#)
5. [My friend or relative is going into prison. Where can I get advice?](#)

1. What are the different categories of prison and prisoner?

What prisons are there for men?

There are 4 categories of prison and prisoner. These are:¹

- Category A,
- Category B,
- Category C, and
- Category D.

Each category is a different security level. The type of prison you are in will depend on:²

- the level of risk you may pose to the public,
- the level of risk you may pose to other prisoners, and
- how likely you are to try to escape.

High security prisons and prisoners

The Ministry of Justice sends men to high security prisons if it thinks they present the highest risk to others. These prisons are maximum security.

There are fewer high security prisons, which means you could be placed far away from where you live or your loved ones.

Category B prisons and prisoners

The Ministry of Justice will send you to a Category B prison if it thinks you are a high risk to other people. You may be sent to a Category B prison if they think you are a high risk of trying to escape.

Category C prisons and prisoners

The Ministry of Justice will send you to a Category C prison if it thinks you are a lower risk to other people. But you aren't ready to be in an open prison.

Category D prisons and prisoners

The Ministry of Justice will send you to a Category D prison if it thinks you are a low risk to others. You may have served a long prison sentence and be due for release soon.

You will be sent to a Category D if the Ministry of Justice thinks you can be trusted in an open prison. These are lower security prisons.

You may be allowed Release on Temporary Licence (RoTL). This could allow you to work in the community, access education or training, and perhaps go on 'home leave'. This is to help you to settle back into the community once you are fully released.^{3,4}

What prisons are there for women?

There are 4 categories of prison and prisoner. These are: ⁵

- category A,
- restricted status,
- closed conditions, and
- open conditions.

Each category is a different security level. The type of prison you are in will depend on:⁶

- the level of risk you may pose to the public,
- the level of risk you may pose to other prisoners, and
- how likely you are to try to escape.

Women's prisons often have facilities specifically tailored to women. Such as a mother and baby unit for women who give birth in prison.⁷

What are Category A prisons?

The Ministry of Justice sends women to a Category A prison if it thinks they present the highest risk to others.

What are restricted status prisons?

You are given restricted status if the Ministry of Justice thinks that you are a high risk to the public.

You may be sent to a restricted status prison if they think you are a high risk of trying to escape.

What are closed conditions prisons?

The Ministry of Justice will put you in closed conditions if it thinks you don't need to the highest levels of security. But you aren't ready for open conditions.

What are open conditions prisons?

The Ministry of Justice will put you in open conditions if it thinks you're a low risk, and you're unlikely to try to escape.

When should my category be reviewed?

Prisons should review your category regularly to see if it needs to change.^{8,9}

The prison could reduce your category if staff think you can be trusted, and you're a lower risk.

It could also increase your category, perhaps if your level of risk increases or you try to escape. This could mean you get transferred to a higher category prison.

What are prison privileges?

You get different levels of privileges or benefits depending on your behaviour. These are also known as incentive levels. There are 3 levels of privileges:¹⁰

- basic,
- standard, and
- enhanced.

New and recalled prisoners enter prison at standard level.¹¹ To move up to enhanced level, you need to be well behaved and prove yourself to staff.

If you break rules, or are badly behaved, you may be moved down an incentive level.¹²

Each level gives you certain rights and activities. For example, if you are on basic level you aren't allowed a TV in your room. Unless you have a severe disability or are at risk of suicide or self-harm, for example.¹³

If you are on enhanced level, you might be allowed more time in the gym and more time out of your room.¹⁴ And more visits from friends or family.¹⁵

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2. What are the different types of prisoner?

There are 2 types of prisoners:

- remand prisoners, and
- sentenced prisoners.

If you are on remand you have some rights and privileges that are different to those of a sentenced prisoner.

What are remand prisoners?¹⁶

You are a remand prisoner if you haven't been found guilty of an offence. Being found guilty is also called being convicted.

You can also be on remand if you have been found guilty, but you are waiting to be sentenced.

If you are a remand prisoner, the prison holds you until your next court appearance.

You might be on remand because you are:

- due to appear in court after you have been charged with an offence,
- on trial for an offence, or
- waiting to be sentenced.

If you are on remand, you will be held in prison and taken to court each day that you need to be there.

A judge will put you on remand if they think you shouldn't be in the community. They might think this because:¹⁷

- you haven't stuck to your bail conditions in the past,
- they are worried you won't attend court,
- you have been charged with a serious crime, for example armed robbery, or
- they're worried you might commit another offence while you're waiting to go to court.

If you haven't been found guilty, you have more privileges than someone who has. You are entitled to:¹⁸

- have more visits, within reasonable limits,
- not have to share a cell with a convicted prisoner,
- wear your own clothes, as long as they are suitable,
- have your own books and magazines,
- have more cigarettes and tobacco,
- send and receive as many letters as you want, and
- vote.¹⁹

If you have been found guilty and are waiting to be sentenced, you won't get these privileges.

The judge will think about how long you have already been in prison when they decide your sentence. This is if you spend time in prison on remand before you're sentenced.²⁰ This means that sometimes it may be decided that your time on remand is enough. Or your sentence may be reduced to account for the time you have already been in prison.

What are sentenced prisoners?

You are a sentenced prisoner if you have been found guilty of a crime, and you are serving the sentence decided by the court.

There are 4 different types of prison sentences:²¹

- suspended,
- determinate,
- extended, and
- life.

What is a suspended Sentence?²²

If a judge gives you a prison sentence of between 14 days and 2 years, they can decide to 'suspend' the sentence. They can do this for up to 2 years.

The judge will set you 'requirements' that you have to stick to during these the time your sentence is suspended. Your requirements could be things like:

- having treatment for your mental health,
- having treatment for alcohol or substance misuse,
- doing unpaid work, or
- sticking to a curfew.

You might not stick to the judge's requirements or you might be convicted of another offence within 2 years. It's likely you will serve your original sentence in prison, and the sentence for your new offence, if that applies.

What is a determinate sentence?

A determinate sentence is for a fixed length of time.²³

You may be allowed to leave prison before the end of your sentence. This is after you have served a minimum amount of time in prison.²⁴ This amount of time is called your tariff.

Once you have served your tariff, you may be allowed to serve the rest of your sentence in the community. This is called being released on licence.²⁵

When you are released on licence, there will be rules that you have to follow. These are called licence conditions.²⁶ For example, you might not be allowed to see the victim of your crime, or go to certain addresses.²⁷ If you have a mental health condition, you might have to work with mental health services.²⁸

If you break your licence conditions, you might have to return to prison.²⁹

At the end of your sentence, you will be supported by either:³⁰

- your local Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC), or
- the National Probation Service.

What is an extended sentence?

You may get an extended sentence if you.³¹

- Have been found guilty of certain violent or sexual offences.
- The judge thinks there's a 'significant risk' to the public of you committing the same type of offence again.
- You have a previous conviction for either:
 - this type of offence, or
 - this offence carries a sentence of at least four years, but

You will only get an extended sentence if a life sentence isn't possible or reasonable.

If you get an extended sentence, the judge will decide how long they think you should stay in prison. They can also give you a longer licence period than normal. This can last up to 8 years.

After you've been in jail for two thirds of your sentence you have the right either to:

- be automatically released from prison, or
- ask the Parole Board to be released.

For example, you can ask the Parole Board for release after 6 years of a 9-year sentence.³²

Life sentence

Judges must give you a life sentence for some offences, such as murder.³³

A life sentence doesn't always mean you have to spend the rest of your life in prison.

The judge will say you have to spend a certain amount of time in prison before you can be released.³⁴ For example, they might say you have to serve at least 15 years before you can be considered for release.

The only exception is for people who have been given a 'whole life order'. These people must stay in prison for the rest of their lives.³⁵

If you are given a life sentence, the National Probation Service will support you for the rest of your life after you are released. This is called a 'life licence'.

It can be difficult to come to terms with a life sentence and how long it means you must be in prison. You will have to manage being away from friends and family for a long time. And consider how you are going to spend your time in prison. There are prison staff who support lifers. They can answer any questions you have.³⁶

What is an indeterminate sentence?³⁷

An indeterminate sentence is a sentence with no fixed end. They are sometimes called Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences.

Indeterminate sentences were given to people who were thought to be a particular risk to the public.

Since December 2012, judges can't give IPP sentences. But some people in prison are still on them.

Age and Gender

There are specific prisons for men, women, and young people.

If you are under 21, a court can send you to a juvenile prison. There are 3 types of juvenile prisons:³⁸

- young offender institution (YOI), for people aged 15 to 21,
- secure training centres, for people aged under 17, and
- secure children's homes, for people aged 10-14.

YOIs are similar to adult prisons. But they focus much more on education and training.³⁹ Some adult prisons will have a YOI attached to them.

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3. What happens when I first arrive in prison?

A prison van will take you from court to the prison reception.⁴⁰ Prison staff will ask if you need help with anything such as healthcare.⁴¹

Officers may strip search you to make sure you don't have anything that could hurt people, such as drugs or weapons.⁴²

What will happen to belongings?

Staff will make a record of anything you have on you, such as clothes and valuables. You will be allowed to keep some of these things. But staff will put other things in storage and give them back to you when you are released.^{43,44}

What happens with my medication?

If you have medication with you, you won't be allowed to take this into the prison with you. The prison staff will make a note of your medication and your health condition, if you share this with them.

Staff will then give this information to the healthcare department. They will make sure you have a prescription for the medication you need as soon as possible. You shouldn't have to miss or delay a dose of your medication.⁴⁵

Healthcare staff will decide if you should take medication by yourself, or if you need to be supervised. This depends on the type of medication you take, and whether you understand your condition and medication.⁴⁶

How do I get healthcare?

Healthcare staff will speak to you to make sure you get the right healthcare in prison. They can make sure you have any medication you need and book any appointments with doctors or dentists.⁴⁷

If necessary, a visiting psychiatrist can assess your mental health. If the prison can't give you the right care you need, you could be transferred to hospital.⁴⁸

If you were getting social care support in the community, the local authority where the prison is located should continue this. Prison staff can contact your original local authority for information about your needs.⁴⁹

You might not have been getting social care support in the community. But prison managers or healthcare providers might think you need help. They can ask the local authority to assess you. You can also ask for this yourself.⁵⁰

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4. What else do I need to know when I arrive?

What is a personal officer?

Shortly after arriving at prison, you may be allocated a personal officer. This is a member of staff who you can go to for information and advice.⁵¹ You can talk to them about any problems you have.⁵²

You can talk to your personal officer if you are worried about how you are feeling in prison.

You might not know if you have a personal officer, or what their name is. You can check to see if their name is on the door of your room or speak to a member of staff.

What staff work in prisons?

What do prison officers do?

A prison officer does many things. They manage the security of the prison and keep an eye on how you and the other prisoners are behaving. They also check that vulnerable prisoners are ok.⁵³

Prison officers should be able to explain how the prison works and help you with any problems you have.

What other staff work in prisons?

The prison will have staff to cook food and give education and training. It will also have chaplains to give religious and spiritual support.

There will also be:

- healthcare staff,⁵⁴
- offender managers from the probation services,⁵⁵
- resettlement staff to help you return to the community when you're released, and
- staff to help with applying for release from parole.

What is an induction wing?

Most prisons will have an induction wing.⁵⁶ This is an area in the prison for new prisoners. There is usually an induction process that can last between a few days and a couple of weeks.

During this time, you can see how the prison runs and what is expected of you. And what activities there are for you to do. The prison will check your

level of reading, writing, and maths.⁵⁷ You can get education and training in prison.⁵⁸

Some prison departments will give you information to look through when you are shown to your room. If you struggle with reading, ask another prisoner or a member of staff to help you look through this information.

What are wings or house blocks?

Your accommodation may be called wings or house blocks. House blocks are usually separate from the main prison buildings.

There may be different accommodation for specific prisoners. For example, wings for:

- new prisoners,
- prisoners on remand,
- sentenced prisoners, and
- lifers.

Prisons don't have hospitals, but many have in-patient beds.⁵⁹

If your prison accepts adults, and young offenders aged 18-21, they are usually housed separately.

On each house block or wing, there will be rooms or cells for you to sleep in. Sometimes there may be dormitories, or you may need to share a cell with another inmate.

There are shower and bathroom facilities, places to eat, activity areas with TVs or pool tables, public telephones, and staff offices.

What are Listeners?

Most prisons have a Listener scheme. This is a service that is there to give you emotional support whenever you need it.

The service is staffed by other prisoners, who are trained and supported by the Samaritans to become Listeners.⁶⁰ A lot of prisoners find this service helpful when they're having a difficult time.

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5. My friend or relative is going into prison. Where can I get advice?

It can be a very difficult if you have a friend or relative in prison. It affects everyone differently. Some people may be angry, upset, or feel ashamed and worried.

You may find it helpful to contact a helpline like the Offenders' Families' Helpline or the Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT). Their contact details can be found in our [Useful Contacts](#) section.

Further Reading

You can find more about:

- Prison - Planning for release
- Healthcare in prison
- Criminal courts and mental health
- Complaints about prison

at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

Useful Contacts

Prisoners' Advice Service (PAS)

PAS offers free legal advice and information to prisoners in England and Wales on their rights, conditions of imprisonment and Prison Rules.

Telephone: 020 7253 3323

Address: Prisoners' Advice Service, PO Box 46199, London, EC1M 4XA

Website contact form: www.prisonersadvice.org.uk/about/contact/

Website: www.prisonersadvice.org.uk

Prison Reform Trust

This is an independent charity that works to improve support for prisoners. They run a helpline that advises prisoners.

Freephone helpline: 0808 802 0060. Open on Monday 3pm–5pm and Thursday 10:30am–12:30pm

Address: Prison Reform Trust, FREEPOST ND 6125, London, EC1B 1PN

Email: advice@prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Website: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Offenders' Families' Helpline

The Offenders' Families' Helpline can support anyone in England and Wales whose family member is in the criminal justice system. They give advice and information on all aspects of the system. For example, what happens when someone's arrested, visiting a prison, and preparing for release.

Telephone: 0808 808 2003. Open Monday to Friday, 9am-8pm. And weekends, 10am-3pm.

Address: Offenders' Families Helpline, Pact, 29 Peckham Road, London SE5 8UA

Email: info@prisonersfamilies.org

Website: www.offendersfamilieshelpline.org

Nacro

This is a charity run by ex-offenders that also has a mental health department. Nacro provides a range of services across England and Wales. For example, resettlement services, youth projects, education, and employment. You can look for local services on their website. They also produce information resources and have a resettlement advice helpline.

Resettlement advice: 0300 123 1999

Address: Walkden House, 16-17 Devonshire Square, London, EC2M 4SQ

Email: helpline@nacro.org.uk

Website: www.nacro.org.uk/

POhWER

POhWER offers advocacy in some prisons. You can check their services on their website.

Telephone: 0300 456 2370

Minicom: 0300 456 2364

Skype: pohwer.advocacy

Text: Send the word 'pohwer' with your name and number to 81025

Address: PO Box 17943, Birmingham, B9 9PB

Email: pohwer@pohwer.net

Website: www.pohwer.net

Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT)

Their website includes links to useful information for prisoners and family and friends.

Address: 29 Peckham Road, London, SE5 8UA

Email: info@prisonadvice.org.uk

Website: www.prisonadvice.org.uk

Advocacy Focus

Provide advocacy support in some prisons in Lancashire, Trafford and Bradford.

Telephone: 0300 323 0965

Address: First Floor, The Old Tannery Eastgate, Accrington BB5 6PW

Email: admin@advocacyfocus.org.uk

Website: www.advocacyfocus.org.uk/prison-support

Unlock

A charity led by ex-offenders. They give information on things like banking, insurance, employment, and how benefits and housing are affected by being in prison. Unlock are a very small team, so they ask you to go on the website and read through the information there, before you contact them.

Telephone: 01634 247350. Open Monday to Friday, 10am-4pm.

Text or WhatsApp: 07824 113848

Address: Helpline, Unlock, Maidstone Community Support Centre, 39-48 Marsham Street, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 1HH

Website contact form: <https://infohub.typeform.com/to/zguWrK>

Website: www.unlock.org.uk

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Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0808 801 0525
Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Email advice@rethink.org



Patient Information Forum

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this Information helped you

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

RAIS
PO Box 18252
Solihull
B91 9BA

or call us on 0808 801 0525

We're open 9:30am to 4pm

Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)

Need more help?

Go to rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on: 0808 801 0525 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

Can you help us to keep going?

We can only help people because of donations from people like you. If you can donate please go to rethink.org/donate or call 0121 522 7007 to make a gift. We are very grateful for all our donors' generous support.

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Equality, rights, fair treatment, and the maximum quality of life for all those severely affected by mental illness.

For further information on Rethink Mental Illness Phone 0121 522 7007
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