

Rethink  
Mental  
Illness.

# Good health guide.

Your route to getting  
healthy if you have a  
mental illness.

## About the Good health guide

Our supporters regularly tell us that the physical health of people with mental illness can get overlooked. They want to take steps towards getting healthy but don't know how. If, like them, you want to get healthy and don't know how, this guide can get you started.

**“It seems that once you have a mental health diagnosis any physical symptoms you experience are assumed to be part of your diagnosis.”**

Rethink Mental Illness has been working hard to make the physical health of people with mental illness a top priority. We hope this will mean that GPs, psychiatrists, mental health nurses and social workers are going to get better at prioritising the health of people with mental illness.

With this guide, you can become healthier!

Our Good health guide sets out some simple ways that you can get healthier:

- Maybe you'd like to know how to access local health services? Or perhaps you'd just like to know the types of changes that these services can make to support you?
- Maybe you'd like a check up, a review of the medication you're taking or some help with any side-effects of your medication?
- Perhaps you'd like to try eating healthily or taking more exercise?
- Or you may be thinking of giving up smoking, cutting down on how much you drink or maybe you'd like to sleep better?

So if you want to take a first step towards getting healthy, this guide can help you to get started. We've divided it into sections, so can choose the areas most relevant to you. Many sections have a step-by-step action plan. There's also a checklist to help you prepare for appointments.

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# Accessing local health services

## Accessing local health services



People with mental illness have told us that they sometimes get nervous going to their local GP surgery. For some, this is because they find it difficult to be with so many people in the waiting area. For others, they feel uncomfortable being asked questions by the receptionist. Sometimes it's just because the appointments are only around seven minutes long and they don't feel they have enough time.

### Can you relate to any of these issues? Try these handy hints.

- You can make a double appointment with the GP, nurse or healthcare assistant at the surgery if you feel that you need more time or you have more than one health matter to discuss.
  - You don't have to tell the receptionist at the surgery why you need an appointment. You could just say you would prefer not to tell them.
  - You can take someone along with you to the appointment if you would like to. This could be a carer, friend or relative. You could also take an advocate.
- An advocate is someone who is independent from health services and can help to make someone's voice heard. You can search for advocacy services at **[www.actionforadvocacy.org.uk](http://www.actionforadvocacy.org.uk)** or call Action for Advocacy on **0207 921 4395**.
- Try to write down important points when you're at your appointment. It can be difficult to try and remember everything that is discussed and will give you something to refer to after the appointment if you need to.
  - You can ask your GP to print out information for you to keep. You can also ask your GP to repeat things or explain things more if you need to.

It's good to prepare in advance. We have produced a checklist at the end of this booklet that may help you. You can use it to make notes about what to discuss before your appointment.

You could show this to your GP, psychiatrist or nurse if you are worried about forgetting anything or getting your point across. You can also use our checklist to make notes while you are at your appointment.

## Make services work for me

GP surgeries have to be flexible to help people with mental illness. Sometimes you might want to ask for changes in the way they support you.

### For example you could ask to:

- Be able to book appointments later in the day. If your surgery only offers same-day appointments, you usually have to phone first thing in the morning. If you are on certain medications you may not be able to get up at this time. You could ask to be able to book the appointment later.
- Receive appointment reminders if you think you might forget your appointment due to your condition. The surgery could send you a text or give you an appointment card.

- Have a friend, relative or carer to be told about your appointment. If you think you might forget your appointment, they could jog your memory.
- Wait in a different waiting area, maybe where it's quieter. If you find it difficult to wait for your appointment with other patients, it is reasonable to ask for this.
- Have a longer appointment.

If you need to, you could mention that surgeries have to make these changes because of the Equality Act 2010. They are called 'reasonable adjustments'.

## What if I don't have a GP?

It's really important that you have access to a local GP, nurse or healthcare assistant and we recommend that you register with your local practice as soon as you can.

You or someone you know can find details of your local surgeries at the NHS Choices website: **www.nhs.uk**. You can also ring NHS Direct on **0845 46 47**.

You will need to live in the area that the GP surgery covers and will usually be given a form to complete to provide your personal details. Once accepted, you will be able to make an appointment at the surgery.

It's really important that you have access to a local GP, nurse or healthcare assistant.

See our 'What to expect from your GP' and 'Advocacy' factsheets [www.rethink.org/factsheets](http://www.rethink.org/factsheets) and our 'What's Reasonable?' guide.

Getting  
a check up  
and a  
medication  
review



# Getting a check up and a medication review



Getting a check up is a good way to help you stay healthy. Any health problems you may have can be picked up early and dealt with when they're likely to be easier to treat. You could think of a physical health check like a regular M.O.T. All you need to do is make an appointment for a check up with your practice nurse.

If you've been diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, schizoaffective disorder or psychosis your GP should ensure that you have a regular annual check up. Your practice may already have written to you to invite you to a check up. If you've not received a letter from your GP surgery, you can make an appointment yourself and we really recommend that you do.

You could also see if you are on your GP surgery's severe mental illness register. Being on this register simply means that you will get a reminder for your health check.

In some areas of the country, local mental health services do their own physical health checks rather than GP surgeries.

## What will the nurse check?

- **Your blood pressure.** You may have had this done before when a cuff was put around your arm while you are sitting down. This will let you know if your blood pressure is high, normal or low. If it's high the nurse may suggest you eat healthily, take regular exercise and have healthy limits of alcohol intake. This is likely to reduce your blood pressure. If lifestyle changes are not enough, you may also be offered medication to lower blood pressure. You can ask about any side-effects this medication may have.
- **Your cholesterol,** which is tested with a simple blood test. This looks at how much cholesterol is in your blood. Cholesterol is a fatty substance that your body needs

to function normally. If you have too much it can build up in the arteries that carry blood around the body. This can then restrict the blood flow to the heart, brain and the rest of the body. If your cholesterol is high, your practice nurse can help you to lower it by suggesting a healthy balanced diet that reduces the amount of fatty food that you eat. Regular exercise and stopping smoking can also help to lower cholesterol levels. If lifestyle changes like this do not help to reduce high cholesterol levels, then you may be offered medication to lower it. You can ask about any side-effects this medication may have.

- **Your weight.** They will weigh you to make sure you have a healthy weight that is right for your height. If you're overweight, the nurse can support you to lose weight.
- **Your blood sugar.** Blood sugar is tested with a small finger prick and is often used to check for and monitor diabetes.
- **Your lifestyle.** They might ask how much you exercise and if you smoke. If you want to make changes the nurse could offer you extra help, such as a personal 'health trainer' or stop-smoking classes. Make sure you ask about this support if you would like it.

## What if my GP surgery says they can't do this?

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) produces guidance on how certain conditions should be treated.

The guidelines say that people with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder should have their physical health checked at least once a year. If you have either of these illnesses, you could speak to your surgery about why they are not working within the guidelines.

If you would like support in pushing for a physical health check, you could take a friend, relative or carer with you. You could also use an advocate. An advocate is someone who is independent from health services and can help to make someone's voice heard. You can search for advocacy services at [www.actionforadvocacy.org.uk](http://www.actionforadvocacy.org.uk) or call Action for Advocacy on 0207 921 4395. If you have a care coordinator, you could ask them to contact your GP for you.

You could also make a formal complaint if your GP surgery refuses to give you a physical health check. If you still have problems, you could move to a different GP surgery. Look at page 6 for advice about how to register at a GP surgery.

# Getting my medication reviewed

As well as a check up, it is also important to get any medication you're taking for a mental illness reviewed by your GP or psychiatrist. Antipsychotic medication, antidepressants and mood stabilisers can sometimes have side-effects that can cause poor health.

Common side-effects that some people experience are weight gain, drowsiness, sexual problems, movement problems or problems sleeping. Not everyone will experience side-effects and they do vary from person to person.

A medication review is an opportunity to discuss how any side-effects impact on you or your health. Your GP or psychiatrist may be able to help you deal with these side-effects, perhaps by adjusting your medication, prescribing exercise or helping you to see a specialist who can guide you to eating healthily. If you are taking medication for other health conditions it is useful to review this at the same time.

Local pharmacies can also offer medication reviews. You could ask your local pharmacy about this.

## How often should I have my medication reviewed?

If you are taking medication for your mental illness this should be reviewed regularly. We would suggest that you have a review at least once a year.

Your review might happen at your CPA review if you are on CPA (Care Programme Approach). You can ask your care-coordinator to make sure that your GP provides information about your physical health so that everything is looked at together.

If you are not on CPA you can still ask for your medications to be reviewed all together by your GP or psychiatrist. It is a good idea to ask for this if your medication has not been reviewed for a while.

## What if I'm in hospital?

If you have to spend some time in hospital because of your mental health, you should be given a full physical examination. If you don't get this, you or someone you know can ask the nurses or your consultant for this to take place.

**For more details about side-effects see the side-effect section on page 17.**

Keeping  
your teeth  
and feet  
healthy

# Keeping your teeth and feet healthy



Few people like going to the dentist, but keeping your teeth and gums in check is a key way to stay healthy.

These are some of the ways you can reduce any anxiety you may have about going to the dentist.

- Try to find an understanding dentist. You could ask any friends or family locally if they know of a dentist who is likely to be more understanding of your anxiety about dentists.
- Let the dentist know that you are worried before the appointment.
- You could make an appointment for earlier on in the day so you do not have the whole day to feel worried.
- You could take someone along for support, such as a carer, friend or relative.

## What if I don't have a dentist?

It's really important that you have access to someone who can care for your teeth and gums and we recommend that you register with your local dentist as soon as you can.

To find details of your local dentist either you or someone you know can visit the NHS Choices website at **[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)** or you can contact NHS Direct on **0845 46 47**.

## A visit to the optician

It is also important to have your eyes checked to make sure they are healthy. You should have a check up every two years (unless you've been told to go more often).

To find details of your local optician, either you or someone you know can visit the NHS Choices website at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) or you can contact NHS Direct on **0845 46 47**.

### Will I have to pay?

Free NHS dental treatment and eye tests, glasses and contact lenses are available to people who are on certain benefits. If someone is on a low income, they may also be able to claim for help with these NHS charges.

Further information about help with NHS charges is available at <http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcosts/Pages/Abouthealthcosts.aspx> or by contacting the Health Cost advice line on 0845 850 1166. You can check this before you go to the dentist or optician.

If you have diabetes, it is important to get a special check of the back of your eye (known as the retina) once a year. This is because diabetes can damage this area. If any damage is not picked up, it can lead to problems with your sight.

These yearly checks are different from standard eye tests and are free on the NHS. If you have diabetes but are not up to date with these checks, then you should speak to your GP about this.

### What about my feet?

If you have diabetes then it's really important to take care of your feet. Diabetes can cause poor circulation and reduced feeling in the feet. This can cause some people with diabetes to get an infection around one of their toenails without even realising it. Regular foot checks make sure this doesn't happen.

If you have diabetes or any concerns about your feet why not tell your GP who can refer you to a foot specialist, sometimes called a chiropodist or a podiatrist.

**For details of local dentists  
and opticians contact**

**NHS Choices  
[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)**

**Telephone 0845 46 47**

# Taking care of me check list: who I need to see



## Do I need to register with a GP?

Yes       No

If yes, tick here when complete:

## Do I need to register with a dentist?

Yes       No

If yes, then tick here when complete:

## Have I had a check up in the last year?

Yes       No

If no, then tick here when you've arranged an appointment for one:

## Do I need to have my feet checked, perhaps because I have diabetes?

Yes       No

If yes, then tick here when complete:

# Medication and its possible side-effects



# Medication and its possible side-effects



It's possible that the medication you take for your mental health can have challenging side-effects like extreme tiredness, an overly dry mouth or sudden weight gain.

This won't happen to everyone.

But there are some important actions you can take when your GP or psychiatrist prescribes you any new medication.

- Ask about the potential side-effects and ask what they would recommend to reduce these.
- Inform them of any other medication you are taking.
- Ask if the medication may interact with certain over-the-counter medications, drinks (such as alcohol) or food.
- Ask how often your new medication will be reviewed (including any side-effects). You could ask for your first review within three months, as this is when medication can have the most impact on your physical health.

## What if I'm already on medication and have side-effects?

Some side-effects can be really difficult and challenging and you have every right to make an appointment with your GP or psychiatrist to discuss what you do about them.

## What can my GP or psychiatrist do?

It may be that they check the dosage of your medication and adjust it. If necessary, then a change of medication could be considered.

For a side-effect like weight gain they could give you ways to manage your weight. This could include providing you with someone who can help you to eat healthy food. It is also likely to involve you taking more exercise and your GP or psychiatrist can ensure you're supported to do this.

## What if my side-effects are sexual?

Medication can cause a range of sexual side-effects, including:

- Reduced sex drive.
- Difficulty with getting aroused.
- Problems with orgasm.
- Larger breasts in men and women.
- Irregular or no periods for women.

If you're experiencing any of these, then you can speak to your GP, psychiatrist or care coordinator about them. If the problems are due to your medication, adjusting the dose or switching to a new medication could help. If they are not down to your medication, your GP can investigate what else might be causing them.

What's most important is that you feel informed about the medication you're prescribed or are taking and that you know you can go to your GP or your psychiatrist about any issues that you think your medication is causing you.

If it turns out it's not down to your medication, then a visit to your GP or psychiatrist should still help to sort out the issues you're experiencing.

## Side-effects and blood tests

Some medications can cause rare but serious side-effects.

For example:

- Lithium, which you might take if you have bipolar disorder.
- Clozapine, which you might take if you have schizophrenia.

If you are prescribed these drugs, then you should have regular blood tests, to make sure that everything is ok.

## What if my GP or psychiatrist is unhelpful?

You may feel that your GP or psychiatrist has put your health complaint down to your mental illness, or that they pass it off as an inevitable side-effect of your medication.

### **If you feel that this is the case, you could:**

- Make an appointment to see someone else – if you have been speaking to your psychiatrist, you could go to see your GP. If you have been seeing a GP, you could arrange to see a different GP at the practice.
- Keep a record of any health problems and when they started. This may help to show if they are likely to be a side-effect. For example, you might be feeling very tired recently but you started

taking your current medication a long time before the tiredness started. In this case, being tired probably isn't caused by your medication.

- Take someone along to an appointment with you. Sometimes it is easier to be assertive about what you need if you have someone with you to support you. Maybe you could ask a carer, relative, friend or advocate to go with you.
- Be prepared to put in a complaint. Every NHS service has a complaints procedure.

Tom had been feeling very tired and wondered if this was a side-effect of his medication. He went along to his annual physical health check where he explained how he was feeling. The GP discovered there were thyroid problems in his family, which can cause tiredness.

Tom had a test and discovered that he also had problems with his thyroid. He is now getting treatment for this and has begun to feel better.

See our 'Complaining  
about the NHS and  
Social Services' factsheet  
[www.rethink.org/factsheets](http://www.rethink.org/factsheets)

Eating well  
and being  
active

# Eating well and being active



Eating a healthy balanced diet can make a real difference to your physical and mental health. It can help you stay at a healthy body weight and make you less likely to get some diseases. As well as eating a balanced diet, you need to balance the amount of calories that you eat and drink with the calories you burn.

A balanced diet includes eating enough fruit and vegetables. Have you heard of your five a day? It is a step towards eating healthily by eating five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. If you haven't tried it already, why not give it a go?

## **A portion of fruit could be:**

- One piece of fruit (for example an apple or a banana).
- Two pieces of fruit if it is smaller (for example plums).
- Half an avocado.
- One heaped tablespoon of dried fruit.
- Three heaped tablespoons of vegetables, beans or pulses like lentils or beans (this includes baked beans).
- 150ml glass of fruit juice.

## **You can include more fruit and vegetables in your diet by:**

- Putting dried fruit on your breakfast cereal.
- Making a fruit smoothie.
- Having more than one type of vegetable with your evening meal.
- Replacing unhealthier snacks like crisps or chocolate with fruit.

Dried, frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables are just as good for you as fresh ones. If you pick tinned fruit or vegetables, try to pick fruit in juice rather than syrup and vegetables in unsalted water.

To really be eating healthily, you could eat your fruit and vegetables in place of more unhealthy foods like crisps, biscuits and chocolates. What's more, by taking this approach, you could start to reduce your calorie intake.

### **For a healthier diet, you could think about choosing:**

- Brown bread, rice and pasta rather than white.
- Leaner cuts of meat to cut down on your fat intake.
- Lower fat options like semi skimmed or skimmed milk or low fat yogurts (but check the amount of sugar in low fat options).
- Fewer foods with saturated fats. Saturated fat is in foods like pies, biscuits, cakes and butter.
- Food with less saturated fat, sugar and salt – you can check this by looking at food labels.

### **What could I look for locally?**

Local organisations may offer help or classes with cooking healthy meals. You could see if your council or any local charities offer this. You could also ask your GP or care coordinator if they have any information about this.

### **Healthy eating on a budget**

It is possible to buy healthy foods, even if you are on a budget. Things to think about include:

- Looking at the special offers on healthy options in shops and supermarkets. You could stock up on items on special offer that have a longer shelf life such as canned or frozen vegetables.
- Buying fruit and vegetables from a market or greengrocer can be cheaper than the supermarket.
- Oily fish is good for you. Tinned oily fish such as salmon, mackerel or sardines can be cheaper than fresh fish. It's a good idea to choose fish canned in spring water to cut down on the salt content.
- You can add items such as rice, pasta, lentils and beans to meals to bulk them up. For example, you could put them into soups and casseroles.

**NHS Choices**  
[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

**British Nutrition Foundation**  
[www.nutrition.org.uk](http://www.nutrition.org.uk)

You could also ask your GP to print off information about healthy eating for you.

# Eating well plan



Day of the week	The fruit and vegetables I ate	What food my fruit and vegetables replaced
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

# Being active

Getting enough exercise and being active can be important for both your mental and physical health. Some medications might make you feel more tired. However, moderate exercise can help to improve your mood and general wellbeing and help you to feel better about yourself.

Regular exercise can also lower the risk of physical diseases, including heart disease, diabetes, stroke and certain types of cancer. Being more active can also help you to be a healthier weight.

## How much physical activity should I be aiming for?

Any exercise is better than none. If you are between 19 and 64 years old guidelines say you should do about 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week broken up into chunks. For example, you could do 30 minutes of exercise five days a week.

### **Moderate exercise could include:**

- Walking quickly.
- Bike riding (on level ground or with few hills).
- Swimming.
- Rollerblading.
- Doubles tennis.

Moderate activity will raise your heartbeat and break you into a sweat but you should not be so breathless that you cannot talk.

You could do 75 minutes of vigorous exercise a week instead, which is about the same as 150 minutes of moderate exercise.

### **Vigorous exercise could include:**

- Jogging or running.
- Football.
- Aerobics.
- Singles tennis.



# My physical health exercise plan



How much exercise do I do at the moment?

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total mins
Minutes of activity								

**The recommended total is 150 minutes**

What exercise or physical activity do I most enjoy?

How do I feel after exercising?

How can I increase the level of exercise that I do? Who could I talk to about this (e.g. GP, care coordinator)?

Vigorous activity will raise your heartbeat quite a bit. You should be breathing hard so that it's hard to talk without pausing for breath.

If you are overweight then you should build up to doing this amount of moderate or vigorous exercise. If you have not done any exercise for some time or have other health problems, you could discuss increasing your physical activity with your GP.

You do not have to sign up to a gym or leisure centre to be able to exercise. Many forms of exercise are free such as running or walking. Even housework or gardening can count as exercise and keep you active.

## Exercise prescriptions

You might be able to get an exercise prescription from your GP. These prescriptions give you some free or reduced rate exercise sessions and support from staff at the gym or the local NHS. You could ask your GP surgery if they are able to provide exercise prescriptions. They might only offer them to people who are over a certain weight or body mass index (BMI) or who have certain health conditions.

## Personal budgets

If you receive a personal budget, you could use this money on something that would help your physical health such as:

- Gym membership.
- Use of local leisure centre facilities.
- Buying a bike.

You would need to agree with whoever grants you your budget how to use it. This could be your care coordinator at your mental health team or a social worker from the local social care team.

Only people who have a high enough level of support needs receive these budgets. If you are assessed as having high enough support needs, you could ask for a personal budget instead of receiving other services.

**For further information  
see our 'Personalisation  
in community care'  
and 'Community Care'  
factsheets**

**[www.rethink.org/factsheets](http://www.rethink.org/factsheets)**

## **I don't want to exercise by myself!**

You don't have to. There are many exercise groups locally. Look for:

### **Walking groups**

Groups set up in many local areas that meet regularly to walk together. They can be a way to get active and also to meet with other people and explore new places.

### **Walking for Health**

Web: [www.walkingforhealth.org.uk](http://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk)  
Telephone: 020 7339 8541

### **Ramblers Association**

promotes walking for pleasure and runs local groups.

Web: [www.ramblers.org.uk](http://www.ramblers.org.uk)  
Telephone: 020 7339 8500

You could also find details of local walking groups through your library.

## **Conservation volunteer schemes**

These run environmental projects and community groups where people can volunteer to help reclaim local green places. Offers a chance to help your local area and be outdoors as well as getting physically active.

They also run 'green gyms' – a range of practical projects involving physical jobs in the outdoors.

Web: [www.tcv.org.uk](http://www.tcv.org.uk)  
Telephone: 01302 388883

You might have local organisations that organise physical activities. You could see if there are any local Rethink Mental Illness services ([www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)) or check other organisations such as Mind ([www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)). If you have a care coordinator, you could ask if they know of anything.

Smoking,  
drinking  
and  
sleeping

# Smoking, drinking and sleeping



If you are a smoker, how many times have you been asked to stop smoking? It's likely that the answer is a lot. Maybe you find it annoying to be asked? Perhaps you enjoy smoking or you think it helps to reduce your stress? Maybe you just think that it's too hard to quit?

Unfortunately, there's no getting away from the fact that it's bad for you. If you are not a smoker but use cannabis, you may still use tobacco to smoke with the cannabis. This is also bad for you.

What if someone said that if you stopped you could feel healthier? Would you try? It could be a way to see if they're right and you have nothing to lose from checking.

There's now so much support available to help you quit that it could be worth a try. You could even keep a record of the benefits you gain (see the chart on page 30).

## So how can I get help with stopping smoking?

### You could:

- Go to see your GP who could prescribe nicotine replacement patches or gum, or medication to help you stop smoking.
- Join an NHS Stop Smoking Service locally that can offer one-to-one support or regular groups. You can contact NHS Smokefree to find your nearest service. Their details are in at the end of this section.

**NHS Smokefree**  
[www.smokefree.nhs.uk](http://www.smokefree.nhs.uk)

Call 0800 022 4 332  
Monday to Friday  
9am to 8pm,  
Saturday and Sunday  
11am to 5pm

## Isn't there stop smoking medication?

Yes, but some of the medications used to help stop smoking can interact with medication for mental health conditions. This is something that your GP would need to check.

And don't forget to also check if the medication you're on can be affected. Smoking can reduce the levels of some medications in the blood. When you stop smoking, you might need a lower dose of your medication for it to have the same effect.

You can use this chart to monitor changes in your health when you're not smoking. It'll be a good way to see what you achieve. Perhaps your breathing is easier, or you notice you have more energy. Maybe you can climb the stairs faster.

It's important to remember that these changes don't happen overnight and it might take a few weeks, but pay close attention to how you feel when you're not smoking and you'll be sure to see some really positive changes.

## My non-smoking health record

Day	My new health benefits

# Drinking

If you drink more than the recommended daily limits of alcohol your health can suffer. You could end up with liver problems, reduced fertility, high blood pressure and increase the risk of heart attack and certain cancers.

## What is the recommended daily limit for alcohol?

If you are a man the most you should drink is three or four units in one day, but you shouldn't do this every day. If you are a woman the most you should drink is two to three units of alcohol in one day and not every day of the week.

## Medication and alcohol

Some medications for mental health conditions can interact with alcohol. It may be recommended that you avoid alcohol or limit your intake. You could find this out by checking the information leaflet that your medication comes with.

**Drinkline**

**National Alcohol Helpline**  
**0800 917 8282**  
**open 24 hours a day**

## Cutting down on alcohol

**If you want to cut down on your alcohol intake, you could try:**

- Letting your friends and family know so that they can support you.
- Taking it a day at a time.
- Choosing smaller sizes of drinks – for example have a small glass of wine instead of a large one.
- Choosing alcoholic drinks that are lower in strength (you can check this on the bottle or can).
- Drinking a non-alcoholic drink in between alcoholic drinks.

## What is a unit of alcohol?

### 1 unit

A single 25ml shot of spirits (e.g. vodka, rum, gin).

### 1.5 units

A small glass of wine (125ml).

### 2 units

A pint of lower strength beer, lager or cider.

### 2.1 units

A standard glass of wine (175ml).

### 3 units

A large glass of wine (250ml).

# My physical health



## Drinking

How much alcohol do I drink at the moment?  
(Look back at page 31 to understand how much a unit is).

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total units
Units of alcohol								

**It is recommended that men do not drink more than 3-4 units per day and women do not drink more than 2-3 units per day**

Do I drink more than the recommended amount of alcohol?

If yes, then how could I cut down on the amount I drink?

## Sleeping

Generally, how do I sleep?

Well		OK		Badly	
------	--	----	--	-------	--

If I would like to sleep better, what could I change or try to improve my sleep? Take a look at some of our tips in the 'sleeping' section.



# Sleeping

Problems with sleep can affect how you feel physically and mentally, and how you feel can also affect how you sleep. Certain medications can also affect your sleep, causing you to sleep too much or not enough.

## To get better sleep, you could try:

- Relaxing before bed with a warm bath, reading a book or listening to the radio.
- Exercising regularly but avoiding vigorous exercise too close to bedtime.
- Cutting down on caffeine, especially in the evening.
- Avoiding too much food or alcohol late at night.
- Going to bed and waking up at roughly the same time each day.
- Having a bedroom that is dark and quiet.
- Having a comfortable bed.
- Not having a TV in the bedroom.

If you can't get to sleep, get up and do something relaxing. Go back to bed when you feel sleepy.

If you regularly have problems sleeping, then you could discuss this with your GP. Sometimes, GPs or psychiatrists may offer you medication to help you sleep. You should try to use these as little as possible because they are not generally a long-term solution.

You might find trying to make some of the changes above help to make longer lasting improvements to your sleep.

**How did you sleep?**  
[www.howdidiyousleep.org](http://www.howdidiyousleep.org)

Here you can find a guide to improving your sleep.  
You can call the Mental Health Foundation for a hard copy of the guide on 020 7803 1101 (the first copy is free).

# Managing diabetes

# Managing diabetes



Your body takes carbohydrates in food and converts them to glucose (sugar) to be used for energy or fuel. If you have diabetes the level of sugar in your blood is too high. This is because your body cannot use it properly and it builds up in your blood.

## What are the signs of diabetes?

### Symptoms of diabetes include:

- Passing urine more often than usual, especially at night.
- Being more thirsty.
- Being extremely tired.
- Losing weight with no reason why.
- Blurry vision.

## What causes diabetes?

### You are more likely to have diabetes if you:

- Have severe mental health problems.
- Are overweight.
- Have high blood pressure.
- Have previously had a heart attack or stroke.
- Are taking antipsychotic medication.

## How can I reduce my chance of getting diabetes?

**Some of the risk factors for diabetes are not in your control. However you can try to:**

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Keep a healthy blood pressure.

Eating healthily and keeping active can help you to prevent diabetes – take a look at the ‘Eating well’ and ‘Being active’ sections of this booklet on page 21.



### **Should I get a test for diabetes?**

If you have a physical health check your GP or nurse should check your blood sugar levels.

Take a look at pages 9-11 so you can see how you can get a physical health check.

If you are not due a physical health check but are showing the signs of possible diabetes, then you could book an appointment with your GP surgery to have a diabetes check.

### **How is diabetes treated?**

Diabetes cannot be cured but can be managed very well. This usually involves lifestyle changes. This can include eating well, keeping active, managing your weight, giving up smoking and keeping an eye on your alcohol intake. Some people may need medication to control diabetes.

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# Preventing cancer

# Preventing cancer



## For women

### Checking my breasts

It is important to get to know your breasts and what is normal for you. This can help you to check for any possible early signs of breast cancer. You can fit this check into your routine – you could do it in the bath or shower.

#### Look out for:

- Changes in the shape, size or feel of your breasts.
- A new lump in one breast or armpit.
- Puckering, redness or dimpling of the skin.
- Changes in the position of your nipple or nipple discharge.
- New pain or discomfort on one side only.

**Picking up cancer early can make it much easier to treat.**

**Did you know you can check yourself for early signs of some cancers? The NHS can also do tests.**

You should check your breasts at different times of the month so you know how they feel at different times and what is normal for you.

If you spot any of these signs then it is important to get them checked out by your GP. You can ask to see a female GP if you would like. You could also take someone along for support to your appointment if it would help.

Men can also have breast cancer. If you are a man and notice any of these changes, then you should also check them with your GP.

### Mammograms

If you are a woman aged between 50 and 70 years old and are registered with a GP you will be invited for a mammogram test every three years. A mammogram is an x-ray of the breast. The x-rays are checked to see if everything is normal and can detect signs of breast cancer early on. Only female staff carry out mammograms.

### Smear tests

Smear tests check if there are any abnormal cells in the cervix to

prevent cervical cancer. The cervix is the lower end of the uterus/womb at the top of the vagina. Finding abnormal cells does not mean you have cervical cancer. However, in some cases if you have abnormal cells you can receive treatment to prevent cancer. All women between 25 and 64 years old who are registered with a GP receive regular invites for cervical screening. If you are between 25 and 49 you will get an invitation every three years. If you are older than this, you will receive an invitation every five years.

The tests take about five minutes. A doctor or nurse will gently hold your vagina open and brush your cervix to take a sample of cells to be tested. It can feel uncomfortable but is not usually painful. Relaxing as much as possible will make the test easier. If you would specifically like the test to be carried out by a female you can ask for this.

## For men

### Checking my testicles

It is important to get to know your testicles and what is normal for you. This can help you to spot any possible early signs of testicular cancer. It is best to check your testicles after a warm bath or shower. Be familiar with the size and weight of your testicles, and feel each one individually between your

finger and thumb. They should be smooth with no lumps. If you find a lump or swelling, then it is important to ask your GP to check this out. You could also take someone along for support to your appointment if you would like to.

## Bowel cancer

**Bowel cancer can affect both men and women. Possible signs of bowel cancer include:**

- Bleeding from your bottom.
- Blood in your stools.
- A change in bowel habit for three weeks or more (especially to looser or runny stools).
- Unexplained weight loss.
- Unexplained extreme tiredness.
- A pain or lump in your tummy.

If you have noticed any of these changes, then it is important to ask your GP to check this out.

If you are between 60 and 69 years old (in England), you will be invited along to a regular bowel cancer screening check. This is a home testing kit, where you provide a sample of your stools.

If any blood is found in it, then you will be asked to go along for more tests. However, this does not mean that you have bowel cancer.



“I have found that by talking to my GP about my physical health problems, it has eased my anxiety and improved my overall health.”

**Cancer Research UK**  
[www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

**Cancer Nurse  
Information Line:**  
0808 800 4040  
Monday to Friday,  
9am to 5pm

# Appointment checklist

# Appointment checklist



Date of appointment				
Time of appointment				
Who is the appointment with?				
Double appointment needed?	YES		NO	
Would I like anyone to come along with me (e.g. friend, relative, advocate)?				
How am I feeling?				
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
What would I like from the appointment?				
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
Medication I'm taking:				

Am I experiencing any side-effects from medication?	YES		NO	
If yes, what are these side-effects and how are they affecting me?				
Would I like to change my medication?	YES		NO	
Am I up-to-date with my physical health check?	YES		NO	
If not, then I could ask to arrange this when I go to my appointment.				
<p>You can use the space below to make notes about what is discussed at the appointment.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>				
Is there anything I need to do after the appointment?	YES		NO	
<p>If yes, what do I need to do?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>				
Is the GP/nurse/healthcare assistant going to be doing anything after the appointment?	YES		NO	
<p>If yes, what will s/he be doing?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>				

“ I ask for so much support with my mental health I feel like I am taking up too much time to raise physical health concerns, especially when appointments are so short and can be difficult to get. I feel I have to prioritise and mental health wins.”

# Other resources

## Other resources



### NHS Choices

Provides information on a wide range of health issues and living well  
**[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)**

### Rethink Mental Illness factsheets

Information and advice factsheets on a wide range of issues affecting people with mental illness, their family, friends and carers.  
**[www.rethink.org/factsheets](http://www.rethink.org/factsheets)**

### Rethink Mental Illness Advice and Information Service

Advice and information that relates to people with mental health problems, their friends, family and professionals. We have experience of working with people who are having difficulty getting help.  
**Phone: 0300 5000 927**  
**10am to 1pm, Monday to Friday, excluding bank holidays.**

## Who we are

Rethink Mental Illness is a charity that believes a better life is possible for millions of people affected by mental illness. For 40 years we have brought people together to support each other. We run services and support groups that change people's lives and challenge attitudes about mental illness.

We directly support almost 60,000 people every year across England to get through crises, to live independently and to realise they are not alone. We give information and advice to 500,000 more and we change policy and attitudes for millions.

**We can provide details of the information sources we used to create this guide. Get in touch by contacting our Advice and Information Service on 0300 5000 927 or email [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org). Lines are open on Monday to Friday between 10am and 1pm.**



Rethink Mental Illness is a partner in:





“ I have struggled with physical and mental health issues. My physical health would not be as bad as it is now if I had had this information 20 years ago!”



**Leading the way to a better quality of life for everyone affected by severe mental illness.**

For further information  
on Rethink Mental Illness  
Phone 0300 5000 927  
Email [info@rethink.org](mailto:info@rethink.org)

[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

