

Pressures on the NHS in Devon triggers top level of escalation

5 January 2024

The NHS in Devon has today entered the highest level of escalation in light of the continued pressures on health services in the county.

All partners across Devon's health and social care system have been working hard to take action to mitigate the disruption during a period of winter pressures, staff sickness and industrial action and are now preparing to deploy further measures.

These measures include some hospitals reducing visiting hours or re-directing people from hospital emergency departments to other services which are more appropriate for their medical needs, if it is safe to do so.

Dr Nigel Acheson, Chief Medical Officer for NHS Devon, said: "It's vital that those who need medical help come forward as they usually would – using 999 and A&E in life threatening emergencies and 111 online for everything else alongside their GP practices and pharmacies.

"However, people need to be prepared that they may be asked to do something slightly different this weekend. I recommend that people should check their local hospital's website and social media for the latest updates."

Devon's acute hospitals in Plymouth, Exeter, Torbay and Barnstaple are also seeing increased cases of norovirus this week; a stomach bug that causes vomiting and diarrhoea.

To prevent the spread of infection, some hospital wards in Devon have had to be closed, which further reduces capacity at an already exceptionally busy time.

Norovirus can spread very easily, for example through:

- Close contact with someone with norovirus
- Touching surfaces or objects that have the virus on them, then touching your mouth
- Eating food that's been prepared or handled by someone with norovirus

Staff at Devon's hospitals are working hard to treat people as quickly and safely as possible.

Local people can help the NHS by:

- Not visiting loved ones in hospital if you have symptoms of a cough, cold, respiratory illness, diarrhoea or vomiting
- Washing your hands frequently with soap and water as this is the best way to stop it spreading. Alcohol hand gels do not kill norovirus
- Getting your flu vaccine from your GP practice or local pharmacy. Some people are eligible for the free vaccine, including over-65s, people with long term conditions like stroke or heart disease and pregnant people
- Getting the COVID-19 vaccine. People who are eligible for the vaccine are encouraged to attend one of the many walk-in COVID-19 vaccination clinics across Devon. No appointment is needed.

Dr Acheson continued; “We absolutely understand that people want to see their loved ones when they are in hospital but it’s really important that visitors don’t come if they themselves are ill. Our hospitals are already very busy and it can make it more difficult for staff to care for those in need.”

Record strikes by junior doctors are also taking place amidst one of the most difficult starts to the year for health services in Devon. The current period of industrial action ends at 7am on Tuesday 9 January and is the longest consecutive strike action ever taken in the history of the NHS.

Dr Acheson concluded; “January is always one of the most pressured times for the NHS in Devon. Six days of industrial action on top of an already busy time is making it extremely challenging for hospitals to maintain safe services this week.”

The message from the NHS in Devon is that urgent and emergency care will be there for you during the strikes, but please choose the right service for your needs. The advice for patients is to:

- **Continue to call 999 in emergency and life-threatening cases - when someone is seriously ill or injured, or their life is at risk**
- Go to NHS 111 online if you need medical help or advice, or you are unsure about whether you should go to hospital; you can also phone 111
- Please check local hospital trust websites for information on Minor Injury Units and Urgent Treatment Centres. Further information can be found here: [Health Pressures - One Devon](#)
- Anyone with a hospital appointment should continue to attend as planned, unless they’ve been contacted to rearrange
- If you, or someone you know, experiences a mental health crisis you can access support from a number of places:
 - 24/7 urgent mental health helpline 0808 196 8708
 - Mental Health Matters helpline (24/7) 0800 470 0317
 - Mental Health Crisis Line Plymouth is open 24/7 0800 923 9323
 - Samaritans 1116 123
 - Text SHOUT to 85258 for 24/7 text support

- Play your part by taking simple steps during the industrial action to look after yourselves and loved ones, checking in on vulnerable family members and neighbours. A first step is making sure your medicine cabinet is well-stocked.
- Please pick up loved ones who are ready to be discharged from hospital.
- Make use of community pharmacies, which can advise on minor illnesses and provide medications. Details about local pharmacies be found via the interactive map here: [Find a pharmacy - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](http://www.nhs.uk)

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- For more information on [when to call 999](#) and [when to go to A&E](#), you can visit the NHS UK website.
- Junior doctors took industrial action for three days immediately before Christmas, which led to over 1,500 appointments (outpatient, inpatient and mental health appointments) in Devon being postponed during that period.