Primary healthcare explained

Summary

- Primary healthcare is the first contact a person has with the health system when they have a health problem.
- Primary healthcare refers to a broad range of health services provided by medical professionals in the community.
- Your general practitioner (GP) is a primary healthcare provider, and so are nurses, pharmacists and allied health providers like dentists.
- Primary healthcare is the provision of health services, including diagnosis and treatment of a health condition, and support in managing long-term healthcare, including chronic conditions like diabetes.
- Primary healthcare includes seeing health professionals to help you maintain good health, with regular health checks, health advice when you have concerns, and support for ongoing care.

Primary healthcare is a term used to describe the first contact a person has with the health system when they have a health problem or issue that is not an emergency. It is the part of the health system that people use most and may be provided, for example, by a general practitioner (GP), physiotherapist or pharmacist.

Primary healthcare providers

Primary healthcare is a term used to describe a range of healthcare providers who work in the community. Any healthcare professional who is the first point of contact for the health system can be a primary healthcare provider.

Most people visit their GP (sometimes referred to as the ‘local doctor’) as a first step when they have a health problem that is not an emergency. The primary healthcare system also includes allied health professionals, such as dentists and physiotherapists.

Primary healthcare settings

Primary healthcare is provided in a community setting, such as a general practice or dental clinic. Primary healthcare providers may work in medical clinics, community health centres and allied health practices, such as physiotherapy and podiatry practices.

Primary healthcare can also be accessed through health advice telephone helplines such as NURSE-ON-CALL.

Primary healthcare services

Services delivered by primary healthcare providers include:

- diagnosis, treatment and care of people with health problems
- promoting good health
- preventing health problems
- early intervention
- managing ongoing and long-term conditions.

Healthcare services play an important role in advising and helping you to prevent illness and maintain good health. Important areas that you should seek advice on include:

- managing and stopping smoking
- hazardous drinking
- stress and depression
- poor diet and
- physical inactivity.
Your relationship with a primary healthcare provider

Your primary healthcare practitioner is usually your regular GP, who provides comprehensive and ongoing general medical care, but you may have several primary health professionals you see regularly. For example, a dentist, counsellor, dietitian, osteopath or physiotherapist, are all primary healthcare providers.

Having a good relationship with your primary healthcare provider is important. You will often be able to establish an ongoing relationship with these providers, so that you can feel confident you have a medically trained professional to contact when you have a health issue.

To maintain a good relationship with your primary healthcare provider:

- Keep medical history information and make it available to your primary healthcare provider.
- Feel confident sharing sensitive information with your primary healthcare provider, as they are not allowed to share it without your permission.
- Prepare for visits by writing down your symptoms, medication and any other healthcare providers you may be seeing, so you can discuss this with your primary healthcare provider.

Primary healthcare services for further assistance

There are telephone helplines like NURSE-ON-CALL available 24 hours a day. These services can be used to work out if you need to see a healthcare professional in person, as well as providing valuable health advice during those hours when other healthcare services are closed.

A primary healthcare service may diagnose and treat common health conditions within their area of expertise. They can also assess the urgency of your medical problems and direct you to the best place for that care. They may also be able to provide referrals to other medical specialists if required.

Where to get help

- Your GP
- Pharmacist
- Local community health centre
- NURSE-ON-CALL, call 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)