



# About the Irish health system

## A guide for refugees and other migrants



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Building a  
Better Health  
Service



## About this guide

Welcome to Ireland. The Health Service Executive (HSE) has developed this short guide to help you understand the Irish public health system.

### The guide is in three parts:

**Part 1** gives you information on how to access different types of health care, the services that are free and how the GP (doctor), pharmacy (chemist) and hospital systems work. Part 1 begins on page 4.

**Part 2** gives you information about specialist services:

- dental treatments,
- eye tests,
- hearing aids,
- vaccinations.

It also gives you information about some staff you may meet in the health system. Part 2 begins on page 9.

**Part 3** tells you what to do in an emergency. Part 3 begins on page 12.

### Keep this guide

This is an important document, so please keep it as you will need it again.

If you don't understand any part of this guide, please ask for help at your local health centre to help you with it. You can also get more information online at [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie) or

**Callsave:** 1850 24 1850

**Phone:** 041 685 0300

**Email:** [hselive@hse.ie](mailto:hselive@hse.ie)

## Part 1: How to access different types of health care and how the system works

### How do I access the health service?

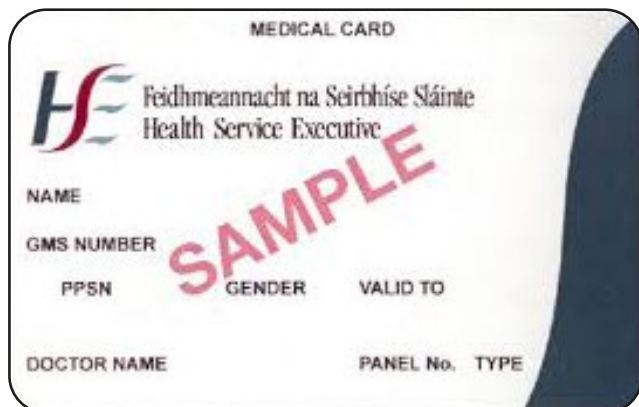
When you arrive in Ireland, you will learn how to apply for a medical card. This card gives you free access to some health services. **You can apply for it online at [www.medicalcard.ie](http://www.medicalcard.ie)**

You need the following information to apply for a medical card: name, address, date of birth, Personal Public Service Number (PPSN), social welfare payment information and GP (doctor) acceptance and signature.

Three months before a medical card expires (can't be used any more), there will be a review to see if a person still qualifies for the medical card. But, the HSE can review if a person qualifies for a medical card at any time.

If you are over 70 you will also need to apply for a medical card.

#### The card looks like this:



### Will I have to pay for health services?

Most health services are **free with a medical card**.

### How long will I have a medical card for?

The card usually lasts for about **two years**. Protection applicants get the card for a year. The HSE will write to remind you to renew your card. Please ensure that you complete and return these forms to renew your card.

If you are over 70, you will need to apply for a medical card just once.

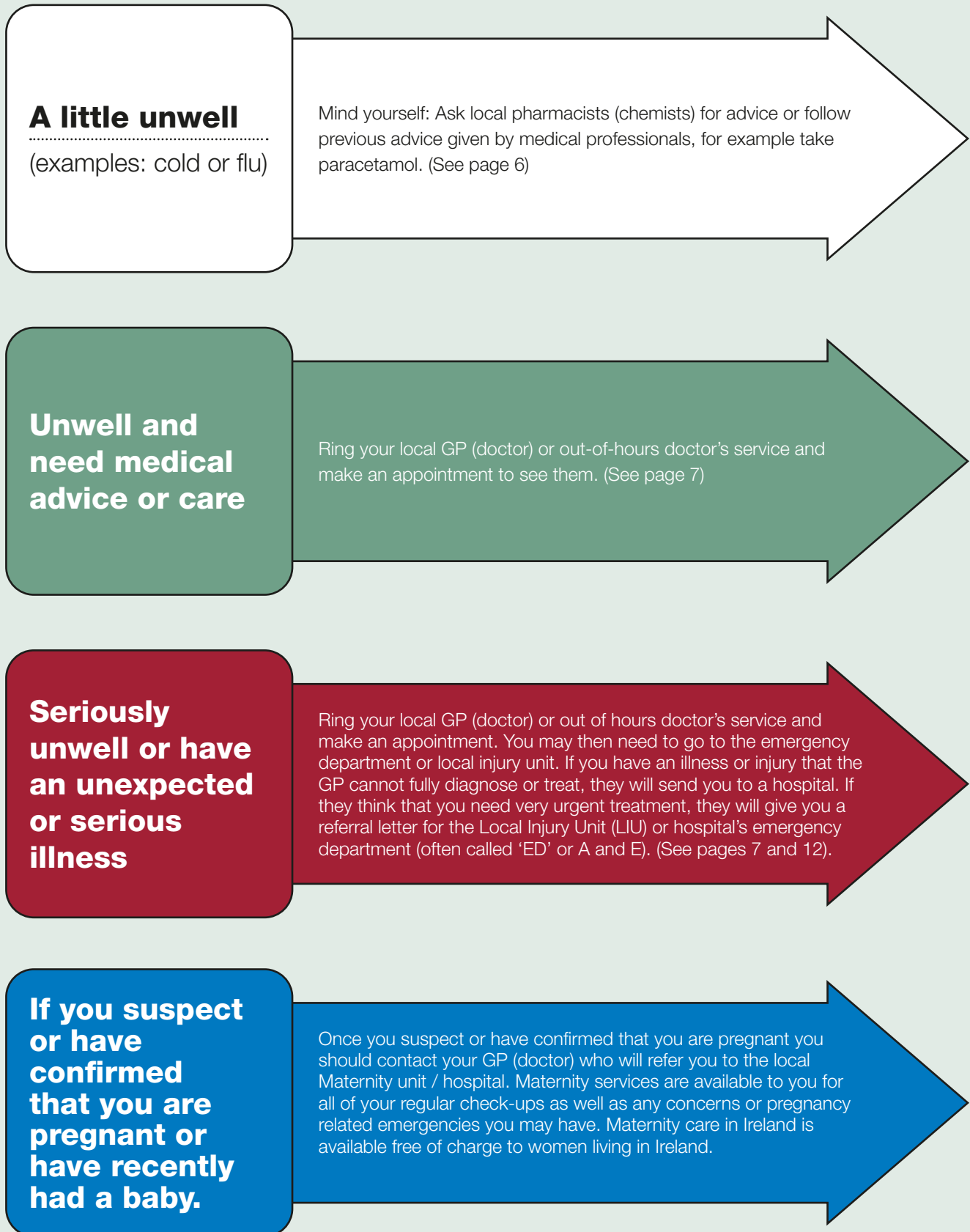
When you apply for a new card or a replacement card, you must make sure that you provide all the information asked for on the application form. You must tell the medical professionals and medical services if information like your address, contact details or your medical or financial circumstances have changed.

When checking if you qualify for a card, the HSE will ask you for your consent to contact other departments.

Being able to continue to keep a medical card depends on your personal, social, medical and financial circumstances. This might mean that you cannot keep your card if you find work or your financial position improves.

## What do I do if I am not well?

This will depend on how unwell you are.



The following pages give you more detail on each of the above options.

## A little unwell

You should take care of yourself or whoever you are looking after. Go to the pharmacist (chemist) and or look up further information on reliable websites (see 'Get more information' below on page 14).

### Take care of yourself and your loved ones

You can take care of yourself and others you may be looking after by:

- eating a healthy diet
- drinking plenty of water
- taking regular exercise
- wearing footwear and clothing suited to Irish weather

### Ask your local pharmacist (chemist) for advice

You can get free advice from your local pharmacist (chemist). You can also get medicine if you need it. (See pages 10-11.) A pharmacy is a shop where medicinal drugs are prepared and sold.

### Get more information

We have a very good website [www.undertheweather.ie](http://www.undertheweather.ie) Type in this address on the internet and you can get useful tips for looking after your health and treating common illnesses.

Medical staff will give you expert help if you need it.

## Unwell and need medical advice

If you feel that you need medical advice, you will need to go to see a GP (doctor). These are qualified **doctors** who work in the community.

### If you can, make an appointment to see them.

Normally, you need to make an **appointment** to see a GP. If you have a medical card, your visit to the GP will be **free**. Otherwise, you might have to pay about €50-€60 a visit. You can ask about the doctor's fee when you are making your appointment.

GPs deal with general health and medical problems. They can:

- **carry** out tests and diagnose what is wrong with you
- **treat** illnesses and minor injuries and advise you on how to recover
- **give** you a prescription – a document which allows chemists to provide medicines that are only available when a doctor says you need them
- **advise** you on mental health supports available if you've been feeling sad or worried about things

### What happens if the GP cannot fully diagnose or treat me?

If you have an illness or injury that the GP cannot fully diagnose or treat, they will send you to a hospital. If they think that you need urgent treatment, they will give you a referral letter for the hospitals Local Injury Unit (LIU) or emergency department (often called 'ED' or A and E).

If your case is not urgent but you need expert treatment, your GP will give you a **letter or send a letter to the hospital** to get an appointment with a medical specialist – usually a specialist hospital doctor who can provide the right advice and treatment, but there may be a wait time for this appointment. This visit will be free if you have a medical card.

In Ireland, health care professionals like doctors try to see patients most in need of medical attention first. Health care professionals decide who needs treatment the most. This means that you may have to wait to be seen. If you do not speak English, ask if you can get an interpreter.

## What if I am pregnant?

If you suspect you are pregnant or are pregnant, you can contact your local Maternity unit/ hospital for advice or attend in person depending on the situation.

Your GP (doctor) will refer you to the local Maternity unit/ hospital who will offer you regular appointments with Midwives and Obstetricians. The Maternity unit/hospital will be able to arrange for interpreter services to be available to you for your appointments. Maternity services are available free of charge to women who are living in Ireland.

If you have any urgent concerns regarding your pregnancy you should attend the local Maternity service without delay. This may include :

- Bleeding for your vagina
- You are leaking fluid from your vagina
- Have observed a change or reduction in your baby's movements.
- Are experiencing headaches / blurred vision/heartburn
- Are known to have a high risk pregnancy
- Signs of labour.

## What do I need to tell my GP (doctor)?

Before your GP can treat you, they will need to ask you questions about your general health and medical history.

The doctor will ask you questions about:

- other illnesses and injuries you had
- how they were treated
- any allergies you may have
- what medications you take

Please answer all the questions the GP asks you. This will help them to make the correct diagnosis and decide on the right treatment.

You should bring your medical card with you to the GP and, if you think it will help the doctor, any further medical information or records.

## Do I need an appointment to see the GP?

In most situations, yes, as most GPs use an appointment system. Appointments are usually made for one family member only. If you need the GP to see two or more people, then you need to arrange more than one appointment.

Some clinics/doctors offer walk-in clinics.

It is very important to go to the appointment.

## What happens if I can't go to the appointment?

If you are offered a medical appointment and do not turn up, **you may not be offered another appointment.** You must be on time for appointments.

If you cannot go to your appointment, please tell the clinic/doctor so that your appointment can be given to another person. You can telephone the clinic/doctor to say that you can't attend. If you still need to see a doctor, you can make another appointment.

When illness or injury needs to be investigated, a GP may do medical tests. Depending on the results, they might send you to a specialist doctor in a hospital. Treatment by a specialist is based on medical need.

## Important

There is a **waiting list** to see most medical specialists and this may mean that you will have to wait for a long time before they see you.

## When are GP surgeries open?

GP services are usually open from 9am to 6pm.

Outside of these times, GP services are available for emergency consultations in **most** towns after 6pm. These services are called "out of hours". You may wish to check with your local service where and when you can access their surgery and arrangements for out of hours. You can use this out of hours service if you need to see a doctor urgently in the evening or at weekends.

The out of hours service is for urgent medical care only. Your GP will have their out of hours information on the answer machine if you ring them outside normal clinic hours. This service is usually between 6pm and 8am Monday to Friday and 24 hours on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays.

The out of hours service does not provide routine clinic appointments and, if your medical issue is not urgent, you should make an appointment with your GP during normal clinic hours.

## What happens when I ring a GP out of hours service?

When you ring the out of hours service in your area, a receptionist will take your personal details.

Your call will be referred to a nurse who will ring you back.

The nurse will decide if you need over the phone nursing advice, an appointment with a GP, a house call, a referral to a hospital emergency department, or an ambulance.

Clinical decisions or treatments made by the out of hours service are noted in your record and the information is sent to your GP to make sure your treatment is followed up if needed.



### Is it okay if I ask questions?

Yes, when you go to see your GP or any other health care professional, **it is very important that you ask any questions about your medication or treatment before you leave.** They will be happy to answer your questions.

## Three useful questions you should ask:

**What is my main problem?**

**What do I need to do?**

**Why is it important for me to do this?**

*(Taken from Ask Me 3®)*

If your GP (doctor) prescribes you medicine, take the prescription (short document) to a pharmacy - also called chemist - to get your medicine.

### Where do I get medicines?



You get medicines at your local **pharmacy** (chemist). A pharmacy is a shop where medicinal drugs are prepared and sold. A lot of medicines need a prescription from a GP (doctor). Pharmacists can provide information on other 'over the counter' medicines that don't need to be prescribed. Pharmacies are usually marked outside by the sign showing a green cross.

## Ask

If you have a prescription, ask your pharmacist (chemist) the following questions:

- How much medicine do I need to take?
- How often do I need to take it?
- Should I take the medicine with food or before I eat?
- What, if any, are the side effects of taking the medicine?
- Where should I keep the medicines (in a fridge or a cool dark place)?

## Tell:

Make sure you tell the pharmacist (chemist) **if** you:

- are taking any other medicines or herbal supplements
- have allergies
- have any medical conditions, are pregnant or think that you might be pregnant

### Basic medicines and supplies

At the pharmacy, you can buy basic medicines and supplies like:

- paracetamol
- cough medicine, and bandages without a doctor's prescription
- you may find it useful to keep a small supply of over the counter medications to treat minor illnesses like paracetamol

### Antibiotics

There are strict rules about prescribing antibiotic medication, and these can **only** be prescribed by a medical doctor or GP. Your pharmacist (chemist) will not let you have antibiotics unless you have a prescription.

### Never share or exchange medicines

Never share or exchange prescription medicines with others. Prescription medicines are **only** to be used by the patient they have been prescribed for.

### Do I have to pay for medicines that are prescribed?

With a medical card you do not pay the full price for medicines that have been prescribed for you. If you moved from an Accommodation Centre to your home and have a medical card, you have to pay the Government fee per medicine. **You must bring your medical card with you to the pharmacy, along with the money to pay the fee for each of the items prescribed.**

If you live in an Accommodation Centre, you may not have to pay these charges. However, if you lived in an Accommodation Centre and move to your home, you must pay the charges.



## Seriously unwell or get an unexpected serious illness

Only go to the emergency department in a hospital if you are:

- seriously unwell
- unexpectedly seriously unwell
- have a serious injury and are unable to get to a GP in time

The emergency department will only treat you if you have one of these situations. You must go to your GP (doctor) for all other treatments.

If you have an emergency and are in immediate danger, read Part 3 on page 18.

### If you are not in immediate danger, go to your doctor

If you are not in immediate danger, do not go to the emergency department unless your GP tells you to and gives you a letter for the hospital staff.

If you go to the emergency department for a non-emergency, expect a very long wait. Staff in the emergency department will work first with patients who need emergency treatment.

Most medical issues can be dealt with by your GP or the GP out of hours service (after 6pm service).

## Part 2: Specialist Services

**This part of this guide gives you information about specialist services (dental treatments, eye tests, hearing aids, vaccinations). It also tells you about staff you may meet in the health system.**

### How do I get dental care?

If **your teeth** need attention, you can use the adult dental scheme run by the HSE (provided by the HSE for free if you have a medical card). It covers a limited range of treatments. To check what is available, you will need to visit a dentist's surgery in your area.

The website [www.hse.ie/eng/services/maps](http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/maps) will help you find a nearby dentist.

You may have to pay for some dental treatment. However, many dentists offer payment plans to help you spread the payments out.

### Children's services

All children up to 16 years of age can access emergency dental clinics in the HSE Dental Service.

For advice on how to access emergency treatment, please contact your local clinic.

Some clinics have a walk in service and for others you need to make an appointment to examine their teeth.

Children in primary schools will usually be offered an appointment in 2nd, 4th and 6th class. Any necessary treatment will be provided. They will also be referred to specialist teeth services (orthodontic services) if needed and they qualify for these services.

### How do I know if my dentist provides services for medical card holders?

A list of dentists who treat the holders of medical cards is available from your local health centre, Citizens Information centre or library. It is likely that the dentist you go to will be on the list.

### How do I get treatment for eye problems?

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If you are an adult with a medical card, you are entitled to a free eye test with an optician and a review appointment every 2 years.

If the optician decides you need glasses, you are entitled to a free new pair every 2 years if you have a medical card. If you are a medical card holder and are concerned about your eyesight, contact your local health centre to make an appointment with an optician.

If you are worried about your child's vision or their eyes, and they are:

- in pre-school - contact the public health nurse or GP
- in primary school - contact the school nurse or GP. School screening happens in junior infants and for all new entrants. They may send your child to a special eye doctor (an Ophthalmologist).
- in secondary school - contact your GP

In an emergency, contact your GP / out of hours service / Emergency Department.

### Hearing aids

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Medical card holders are entitled to free hearing aid services from the HSE. If you want to get a hearing aid on your medical card, you must get your GP to sign a form saying you need one. You will need a full medical card, as you cannot claim a free hearing aid on a GP only card.

### Aids and appliances

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The HSE provides a wide range of medical and surgical aids and appliances, such as wheelchairs and walking aids. These are free of charge to medical card holders and people on the Long Term Illness Scheme. You need to be assessed by a relevant health professional.

Each Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) uses the same way to give funding for medical and surgical appliances. Sometimes, you may be put on a waiting list for appliances as this service is very popular.

### How do I or my children get vaccines we need?

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Vaccinations can help to protect you and your family against certain diseases. You can discuss any questions or concerns with your GP or public health nurse. Vaccines need to be given when your child is at the right age so as to protect them.

It is important your children get their vaccines on time to protect them and other children who are too young to be fully vaccinated.

Your child needs to get vaccines at the right age to protect them. They need a number of vaccines - not just one. If your child got vaccinated before you moved to Ireland, speak to your doc.

Pregnant women should get the flu vaccine and the pertussis vaccine to protect them against flu and whooping cough.

You will be asked to consent to receive (get) vaccinations for yourself and any children under the age of 16 in your care.

Vaccinations for children are free.

### What is consent?

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You will also be asked to give informed consent (agreement) for surgery and treatment. You need to understand your choices and what it means to consent to have a procedure, treatment or vaccine. Please ask medical staff to explain in detail what consent means for different procedures and treatments.

### What if I don't speak English?

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If you don't speak English, please tell the medical staff and ask if an interpreter can be arranged for you.

### In Case of Emergency (ICE)

Health care staff will ask you to provide contact details for:

- your spouse or a family member or
- a person you know that they can contact if you need help

In an emergency, we will ask you for these contact details. We keep this information in our records. We treat this information as private and confidential. In case of emergency (ICE) contacts should be adults you know and trust.

- Please put an ICE contact number on the contacts list in your mobile phone.
- Consider keeping the following text message on your phone in English for medical appointments:

**My name is** \_\_\_\_\_.

**My date of birth is** \_\_\_\_\_.

**I speak Arabic (or another language), and I need an interpreter please.**

**(If I cannot speak) please contact the following**

**person:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Relationship:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location (address):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone / email details:** \_\_\_\_\_

You may also find it useful to put this message in your phone in English in case you get lost:

**Hi, my name is** \_\_\_\_\_.

**I am new to Ireland and I am lost.**

**My address is** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**My eircode is:** \_\_\_\_\_

### What other health professionals might I meet?

When you use our health system, you will meet doctors, pharmacists and other professionals:

- Occupational therapists
- Physiotherapists
- Public health nurses.

(see below for details of what these people do)

### Occupational therapists and physiotherapists

If you have difficulty standing, walking or moving, or if you are recovering from an injury, you will likely get an appointment with an **occupational therapist or physiotherapist**.

### Public health nurse

A public health nurse may come to see you or make an appointment at a local clinic. Public health nurses mainly look after:

- babies and children
- new mothers
- older people

If you get a visit from a public health nurse, community general nurse or an occupational therapist, this is usually as a result of your name being given to them by the HSE following your visit to a GP or hospital. You can get more information about these services from your local HSE health centre, your GP or online at:

[hse.ie/eng/services/list/2/PrimaryCare](https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/2/PrimaryCare)

## Part 3: What to do in an emergency

### What do I do in an emergency?

In an emergency, you have two choices. You can:

- ring 999 or 112 (it's a free phone call) and ask for an ambulance or
- go to your nearest emergency department in the hospital
- If you have an emergency related to pregnancy, you should contact or go directly to your local Maternity unit/hospital.

#### 1. Ring for help (999 or 112)

If you ring one of these numbers, you can call for an ambulance. These numbers can also be used to call the gardaí (police), fire service, lifeboat, coastal and mountain rescue services.

Try and have the following information ready when you speak to the emergency call operator:

- name of sick or injured person and their date of birth
- a description of what is wrong with the person (type of injury), any medical conditions or allergies that you know of)
- where you are and your eircode (if you know it)

If you can, tell the ambulance people the name of the person's GP and a list of medications the person is taking.

Don't worry if you can't do this.

When you ring emergency services, the staff there will ask you to stay 'on the line' (this means stay on the phone) and, if they think it helps, they will tell you what to do.

The operator on the emergency services phone line may also be able to provide an interpreter if you need one.

Sometimes a rapid response person (a person with medical training to help you) may arrive to offer help before the ambulance arrives.

#### 2. Go to the emergency department in a hospital

In an emergency where you or someone you know has a serious and unexpected illness or injury, you could go to the emergency department in a hospital.

- If you have an emergency related to pregnancy, you should contact or go directly to your local Maternity unit/hospital.

**If you want to speak to someone over the phone about how you are feeling call 1 of the two phone services below.**

##### Suicide risk

Call 999 or 112 if you or someone you know is about to harm themselves or someone else.

##### Mental health crisis

A mental health crisis often means that you no longer feel able to cope or be in control of your situation.

In a crisis, you must get help as soon as possible.

A GP can offer support for anyone in crisis. If possible, ask someone to come along with you.

Go to or call the emergency department of your local general hospital [www.hse.ie/eng/services/maps/](http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/maps/)

The YourMentalHealth information line is a phone service you can call any time.

A member of our team can tell you about:

- the mental health supports and services available to you
- how to access different services provided by the HSE and our funded partners
- opening hours

Freephone: 1800 111 888

The YourMentalHealth information line is not a counselling service.

Visit [www.yourmentalhealth.ie](http://www.yourmentalhealth.ie) for more information.

## Other phone supports

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If you want to speak to someone over the phone about how you are feeling call 1 of the two phone services below.

### Samaritans

The Samaritans telephone service is available 24 hours a day. They provide a listening service to anyone who needs it, no matter what you are going through.

For confidential, non-judgmental support:

- Freephone: 116 123
- Email: [jo@samaritans.ie](mailto:jo@samaritans.ie)
- Visit [www.samaritans.ie](http://www.samaritans.ie) for details of the nearest branch

### Pieta House

They provide support for people who are suicidal and people who self-harm.

- Freephone: 1800 247 247
- Text HELP to 51444 – standard message rates apply

## ChildLine

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- Freephone 1800 66 66 66
- Free text the word Talk to 50101

## Face-to-face support

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For face-to-face support contact your GP.

## Urgent help

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Call 999 or 112 and ask for the ambulance service if you or someone you know needs emergency help.

**There may be other local health supports, including mental health supports, in your area.**

Visit [www.yourmentalhealth.ie](http://www.yourmentalhealth.ie) for more information.

## Who we are ...



The HSE is responsible for delivering public health care services in Ireland. HSE stands for Health Service Executive. It was set up by the Irish Government.

In the HSE, we want to give you the best possible care and treatment. There may be times, however, when you think we could do better and sometimes you may even want to tell us about something we have done well.

Whatever age you are, you have rights when it comes to your health including:

- the right to have your say and be listened to
- the right to complain if you are not happy about something we have done

We want you to tell us if you have a comment, compliment or complaint about your health care. For information on how to make a comment, compliment or complaint, please visit:

[www.hse.ie/eng/services/yourhealthservice/feedback/Complaint/](http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/yourhealthservice/feedback/Complaint/)

## We hope you found this guide useful

The information in this book, including the resources and links, does not replace medical advice from healthcare professionals such as your nurse, public health nurse, GP or obstetrician.

Everyone is different.

Always talk with a healthcare professional to give you the medical advice and care you need.

We have made all efforts to make sure this guide is up to date in terms of medical advice. But, with so many changes happening in healthcare, this is difficult. We will update this guide again to include new information when we print it again.

We hope you found the information helpful and wish you a good experience using our health system.

## Get more information

You can get lots of further useful information on the following web links:

[www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

The Health Service Executive provides health services in Ireland, the websites below are all part of the HSE and will give you further information on those services and supports.

[www.hse.ie/eng/about/Who/primarycare/socialinclusion/about-social-inclusion/translation-hub](http://www.hse.ie/eng/about/Who/primarycare/socialinclusion/about-social-inclusion/translation-hub)

Translated documents on common health concerns and other topics as well as access to online health apps

[www.immunisation.ie](http://www.immunisation.ie)

Information about vaccination

[undertheweather.ie](http://undertheweather.ie)

Health education and management of minor illnesses

[www.yourmentalhealth.ie](http://www.yourmentalhealth.ie)

Supports and education for your mental health

[www.medicalcard.ie](http://www.medicalcard.ie)

Medical card online service

Important contact details			
Doctor:		Tel:	
Local health office:		Tel:	
Public Health Nurse:		Tel:	
Accident and Emergency Department:		Tel:	
Out of hours GP Service:		Tel:	
Pharmacy:		Tel:	
Maternity Services:		Tel:	



