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GP Online Services Guidance

*Patient information themes for Online Services*

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Introduction

Patients need to be well informed to make the best use of GP Online Services. It is particularly important that they know how to keep their access secure so that they can protect their privacy, how to use the practice appointment and prescribing services, and to interpret the clinical data in their GP record. Using online access has benefits for the practice as well. It follows that practices are best placed to promote their online access and provide patients with the information they need.

This guidance recommends the messages that will help promote take up online access and help patients use their online access safely and securely. The messages may be communicated in whatever ways the practice chooses, which may include:

* leaflets, posters, waiting room information screens
* the practice website or via the patient participation group or local agencies such as community pharmacies, libraries, post offices and voluntary agencies
* during consultations and correspondences

Some subjects mentioned in this guidance are covered in more depth in other guidance documents in the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) GP Online Services Toolkit: There is a glossary of terms used in the Toolkit.

Promoting online access

Patients need to be well informed to make the best use of online access. It is particularly important that they know how to keep their access secure so that they can protect their privacy, how to use the practice appointment and prescribing services, and to interpret the clinical data in their GP record. Using online access has benefits for both patients and practices. Responsibility lies with the practice for harm that comes to the patient or others from access to the GP data. It follows good practice in supporting and promoting safe online access and providing patients with the information they need about their health.

* + - 1. Benefits of online health record access to patients and practices

Online access can bring benefits to patients and practices which more than makes up for the effort of promoting online access successfully.

* Online appointment and prescription services reduce reception time spent on providing these services.
* Online appointment and prescription services are more accurate and less prone to misunderstandings and mistakes than verbal communication.
* Practices control which appointments are available online.
* Online record access enables patients to be better informed about their health, it can help improve health literacy and promises better outcomes, particularly for long term conditions. They can also access details on their medications which they may otherwise find difficult to remember.
* Online access to laboratory results and hospital correspondence reduces the time required to inform patients about their results and hospital reports and it may reduce the number of consultations. It helps patients prepare for consultations and enables the discussion to focus on the most important topics to the patient and the health professional with less time spent on introducing new information. It may reduce the need for patients to telephone the practice for results or for consultations when the results are normal.
* Patients may identify errors or gaps in their record or prescription list and help the practice improve their record. Patients are able to amend their personal information that may have been incorrectly recorded.
* It enables practices in England to meet their contractual requirement to promote and offer automated online access to patients.
* Anyone with access to a patient facing services app or web portal such as the NHS App, Patient Access, Airmid or Evergreen Life, will automatically have access to all records including consultations with free text and clinical correspondence from 2022 when the access to GP data is launched.
  + - 1. Patients continue to be able to request practices for online access to past records Reasons that patients may like to have online access

The promotion of online access to patients is based on raising awareness that the services exist and the benefits that patients can expect from using them. It should also carefully describe the risks that could arise and how to mitigate them. Consider targeting patients who are most likely to benefit such as those with long term conditions or on repeat prescriptions.

* Patients like the convenience of seeing their records and cancelling appointments and requesting repeat prescriptions online at any time of the day, on any day of the year.
* Online patient services such as appointments and prescription requests are more accurate because the patient can see the details on the screen. As a result, they are less prone to misunderstandings and mistakes than traditional methods of communication such as visiting the practice or using the telephone.
* For some patients with sensory impairment, learning disabilities or limited mobility online access provides an accessible way of communicating with the practice. The accessibility functions/features available via the App to allow views in preferred size etc. saving practices time writing or printing out notes/details.
* Record access enables patients to be more involved in their health care, more prepared for consultations, and better informed to make informed choices about their health care.
* Patients can share access to their record with health professionals outside the practice, improving collaborative care where patients are receiving care at other health organisations.
* Improved record visibility and access can improve trust between the practice and patients.
* Carers with proxy access for the patient they are caring for can gain the same benefits.
* Patients with long term conditions, and their carers, are especially likely to benefit from online record access for e.g. through proxy access.
* Patients undergoing investigations can use online access to view results and advice, reducing the need to phone or visit the practice.
  + - 1. Digital exclusion

Digital inclusion is about ensuring the benefits of the internet and digital technologies are available to everyone. Digitally excluded people can lack skills, confidence and motivation, along with having limited or no access to equipment and connectivity.

There is also a good introduction to GP Online Services provided by Good Things Foundation through their Learn My Way website. The site also offers free online courses for those who are not confident with using computers or the internet.

Ref: LearnMyWay, GP online services: a how to guide, https://www.learnmyway.com/courses/gp-services-online-a-how-to-guide/ (accessed 23 August 2022)

Information for patients applying to the practice for online access

It is helpful to have a standard leaflet that can be given to patients when they ask about or register for online access and made available in the waiting room and on the practice website. You might consider mentioning record access and the associated risks on a safeguarding page on the practice website with advice about how to seek help or support from the practice and local organisations.

NHS England has produced a series of leaflets for patients to introduce online access. They describe online access to patients in general terms covering the registration process including identity verification, transactional services and records access, access security and advice for patients who are considering allowing someone else to access their record or appointments and prescribing record and describes how to protect the security of their online access.

Ref: NHS England, GP Online Services, easy read guides, https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/gp-online-services-easy-read-guides/ Ref: “Young People’s Access to GP Online Services”, NHS England 2016, https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/pat-guid-clr-young-people-gp-online.pdf

When a patient first applies for online access, it is helpful to provide patients with information about the registration process, what online access offers and how patients should use it safely and responsibly. Every practice configures their online access differently. Consider producing your own information leaflet that explains how your system works, tailored to the services the practice provides.

The rest of this guidance offers a list of useful information that you may wish to include in your practice information leaflets.

Practice Registration process for automated online access

* A patient may register for appointment services immediately without verifying their identity. The GP IT System may allow them to do this online.
* The patient must verify their identity before access to prescribing records. Explain how the practice prefers to verify identities of applicants for online access. Patients may be asked to provide documents that will verify their identity. These will include one photo ID such as a driving licence or passport and another which might be a bank statement, secondary or higher education certificate, proof of age card issued under the Proof of Age Standards Scheme, or a credit card or telephone contract statement.
* Appointment booking, repeat prescription requesting and record access to future information is automatically available to all patients who use a Patient Facing Service (PFS) app or web portal for appointments or prescribing.
* Patients must verify their identity and receive their login credentials and passwords face-to-face at the surgery at the same time or arrange for the credentials to be emailed to a verified personal email address. They should not verify their identity and return later to collect the login details.
* Alternatively, if patients plan to use the NHS App to access GP online services they can verify their identity through the NHS App and need not do so at the practice.
* If they already have access to prescribing and want to add online access to historical records, they must confirm their identity again at the practice.
* Registering for historical or proxy record access may take some time because of the time it takes for the practice to check the record for harmful or third-party information. They will be told how long it may take when they apply. It will vary depending on the workload of the practice and the number of applicants for record access outstanding at the time.
* The patient must complete the registration forms which includes confirming that they have read the practice information leaflet and agree to the terms of usage of online access.
* When registration is complete the patient will be given a letter with their login details. They should change the password as soon as they can.

Best use of online access

1. Appointments

* Explain how the practice appointment system works and where online access fits in, particularly if patients can book telephone consultations or triage online
* Give clear advice about how to book and cancel appointments. Ask patients to use their online access to cancel appointments as soon as they know that they will not be able to attend the appointment or no longer need it so that it can be made available for someone else
* For some practices online access may be most useful for booking routine appointments, moving on to requests for same day or telephone triage calls when the practice and patients are familiar with the system
* Explain with whom the patient may make an appointment
* Some practices limit the number of future appointments that patients can book for doctors, nurses or others. If you have a limit, explain why you have a limit and what the limit is.
* Encourage patients to book appointments with their usual doctor or nurse to encourage continuity of care
* Encourage patients to use the online system to cancel an appointment as soon as they know they will not use it.

2. Prescriptions

* How long it takes for a prescription to be ready to collect from the practice or community pharmacy after it has been dispensed
* Ask the patient to sign up to the electronic prescription service (EPSR2) and nominate a pharmacy. Patients can choose a pharmacy for their electronic prescriptions to be sent to. This is called a nomination. By nominating a pharmacy, it will also save patients a trip to the practice to collect the prescription and allows our pharmacies to have patients’ medicines dispensed in advance of collection. This process saves time for patients, practices and pharmacies
* Some online access systems allow patients to request repeat prescriptions before they are due or request prescriptions that are not on their repeat prescription list. Patients should be advised that they will be asked to explain why they are ordering a new prescription earlier than expected and that the online access should not be used to request a new prescription without a consultation

3. Record access

* If the record access offered by automatic access is not required by the patient, the practice can switch off their access at their request, e.g. this may happen if a patient is worried about a safeguarding risk
* The practice can also switch record access back on or provide a custom level of access that is suitable for the individual patient.
* The patient can apply to the practice for a custom level of online services, including reduced record access to either the summary care record information or the detailed coded record which includes information about illnesses and diagnoses, operations, physical examination, lifestyle, screening tests, medication, allergies and adverse drug reactions, vaccinations and immunisations, laboratory and radiology test results and other major investigations
* Making full use of record access requires an adequate level of health literacy. Medical records are technical documents that use medical terminology such as diagnoses and laboratory tests that the patient may not recognise or understand. There are good websites that provide clear and unbiased information about terms that the patient may come across in the record (e.g. NHS UK ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)) and [patient.co.uk](http://patient.co.uk)). Patients should remember that the explanations are not personalised to their circumstances and it may be helpful to discuss anything that they are not sure of with their nurse or doctor. There is also help and support available on the NHS App
* Some data may be redacted or hidden from online access by the practice, if it is thought to be in the patient’s best interests or is confidential information about a third-party. Records should be checked for harmful or confidential third-party data should be redacted before record access is switched on and as it is added to the record in future
* Depending on system functionality, patients may be able to use their phone or tablet to show elements of their record to other health professionals outside the practice or give specific health professionals 24-hour access to their GP record
* When a patient moves to a new practice, all access to online services from their previous practice, including online record access, will be switched off.
* If the patient using the NHS Login to authenticate their access to GP online services, they will be available, including prospective record access as soon as they register at the new practice, but only to records created at new practice.
* If the patient does not have an NHS Login they will have to apply to their new record for login credentials.
* Practices may temporarily block automatic record access until they have had an opportunity to review the record from the previous practice to see if there is any indication that record access may be unsafe for the patient

4. Personal health record

* Some GP Online systems also have functionality that allows patients to record their own health data and view it alongside the GP record. Some also allow the data to be copied into their GP record.

Access delegated to a proxy

* Online systems may allow proxy access to a third-party, who may or may not be registered with the practice, to be given login details to have online access to the patients’ transactional services and/or record. This can be very useful in certain circumstances
* If the patient chooses to share access to their online GP account with someone else (their proxy), there are advantages for the patient if the practice gives the proxy their own login credentials including a separate password
* The GP record may contain very sensitive information that they wish to keep private. Even the prescribing record may reveal confidential information about them. The patient should check through their online record to ensure that there is nothing there that they would not want their proxy to see. Patients must have complete trust in anyone who they allow to have access to their online account. If they are in any doubt they should not share or they should ask the practice to redact any sensitive data where it is possible
* The practice will also be able to ensure that the proxy has all the information about how to make good use of online access, including how to keep it secure, the implications of data quality and for parents, the practice policy about parental responsibility and the competence of young people to make their own decisions about who can access their record. There are many circumstances where this can be helpful. It may be convenient for someone else to book appointments or request prescriptions for them. It may help a carer understand and help to manage their health
* Online access for the proxy should not be configured to allow greater access than is necessary to carry out the actions, such as booking appointments or requesting prescriptions, that the patient wishes their proxy to perform. Depending on the patient’s needs, online access may be configured to allow a proxy to do one or more of the following:
* Book and cancel appointments
* Order repeat prescriptions
* Access the detailed coded GP record
* Access the full GP record
* The practice may have a policy defining which people may apply for proxy access such as close family members, carers, parents or nursing home staff
* If the patient has employed a carer and wants to remove their access when they no longer employ them, proxy access can be easily withdrawn. The patient may also limit the online access to just booking appointments or requesting prescriptions, even if the patient has full record access. There may also be an audit trail accessible to the practice or the patient of who has accessed the patient’s record if the GP system has this functionality
* Although some patients lack the capacity to choose or consent to a third person acting as their proxy, the practice may agree to a carer having proxy access in the absence of informed consent by the patient if it is clearly in the patient’s best interest. An example is a close family member with Power of Attorney for health and welfare or a guardianship

Safe and responsible use of online access

1. Practice precautions to maintain patient safety

The practice takes the safety of patients using online record access very seriously and takes all steps available to protect patients from harm.

The practice can switch off record access or hide information from view at the request of the patient or when the record is created, if it is in the patient’s best interests.

Information may be hidden from view permanently or temporarily. An example of temporary redaction would be to not make some clinical information like the laboratory reports or document that may cause distress or harm to the patient, until there has been an opportunity to discuss the new information with the patient.

The practice is keen to ensure that records are accurate and complete to provide the best care to patients. If the patient sees anything that something is missing or that there appears to be an error in the record, they should inform the practice (See Data Quality below).

2. Third-party information in the record

* Occasionally GP records contain information that relates to a third person, called third-party information.
* Sometimes this information is confidential to the third-party and the practice has a duty to ensure that the information is not disclosed without the permission of the third-party.
* This does not include information from by health professionals providing care to the patient.
* Examples do include information provided by a third-party or information about them mentioned in correspondence about the patient.
* The practice will redact this information so that it is not visible to the patient online. If any such information inadvertently appears online, the practice asks the patient to inform the practice straight away.
* If the patient has been able to see confidential information relating to a third, the practice will inform the other person as soon as possible.

3. Patient’s responsibility to maintain the security of their online access

The security of online access to GP practice services and records is very important and it is the patient’s responsibility to maintain it. To achieve this, they should:

* Protect their login details so that nobody else can gain access to their record.
* Passwords should be easy to remember or stored in a safe place, such as an encrypted password app. They should not be based on something that is easy to guess.
* If they lose the details or suspect that someone else has seen them, they should change their password immediately and inform the practice.
* Use a password, PIN or fingerprint or face recognition system to protect access to the phone, tablet or computer that they use to access their GP Online Services.
* Log out of their browser when they have finished using online access, especially if they have used a public computer.
* Ensure that nobody can see their record on the screen over their shoulder while they are accessing their GP online account.
* Take precautions to avoid cyber attacks, using antivirus software, an effective firewall and safe internet browsing whenever possible.
* They must keep and dispose of all information from the record that they download securely.
* People with visual impairment, who use audio electronic readers need to be careful to avoid being overheard, especially in public places.
  + - 1. Data Quality
* The information in the patient’s record may contain items that the patient does not understand, thinks are mistaken or that may upset them.
* The patient’s record may contain things that the patient is not expecting. There are several reasons why this may happen. The patient should inform the practice if they have any information in their record that they think is wrong or find upsetting.
* This may happen if the patient has forgotten the event in their record, if there is an error in the record, if they fail to recognise a medical term that is synonymous with a lay term that they know (e.g. acute myocardial infarction instead of heart attack), if they disagree with a diagnosis or if incorrect information has been added to the record by the practice or inherited via GP2GP record transfer.
* If any of these situations arise, the patient should let the practice know about it. The practice will be keen to listen and discuss the matter with them as soon as it is possible to arrange an appointment. The practice may explain the information, redact or remove the data, however patients cannot demand that an item they disagree with is removed from the record.

Safeguarding

Patients may be coerced unwillingly into allowing other people to have access to their online records. Even when they have shared their login details willingly or arranged for formal proxy access where the other person has their own personal log in details, online access may be misused or abused.

* If the practice suspects that the patient has been coerced to allow another person to access their online record against their wishes, it is best to refuse proxy access until the suspicion has been clarified
* If a patient is worried that this might happen in the future or has experienced coercion, a failure to respect their privacy or misuse of the system, they should discuss it with the practice immediately. The practice may switch off access until the matter is resolved if that is a safe option. The practice may redact data if there is something that the patient is keen to keep private.
* It is much better for a third person to have their own account and login details
* Proxy access can be switched off or restricted to specific services if the patient wishes without the patient losing their online access
* The proxy should be fully informed about how to use the service responsibly
* The patient and the proxy must verify their identity to the practice and complete a consent form before the proxy is given login details. There is a consent form template in the GP Online Services Toolkit that you can use

Ref: There is more information about automatic record access, proxy access and safeguarding in the Toolkit.