

A formal referral requires an approved digital message to be sent from the GP practice to the pharmacy. Referrals to the Pharmacy First Service need to be sent to the patients chosen pharmacy in a secure and electronic manner. There are several methods of sending a digital referral, but the preferred option is to use a platform that has been approved by the NHS Booking and Referral Standard (BaRS), such as Optum (EMIS) Patient Connect Access or SystmOne [to be released 2025]. This ensures that the referral will be sent directly from the patient record to the pharmacy IT platform.

Benefits for Patients

- **Ensures patients have a private discussion with the pharmacist.**
If signposted, the patient may be seen by another member of the team in the pharmacy area and treated under the Self-Care Essential Service.
- **Reassures patients that their concern has been taken seriously, and the pharmacist will be expecting the patient.**
If signposted, the patient may feel they are not receiving the best care and be unsatisfied with the service provided by the GP practice and the pharmacy as they won't be expecting the patient.
- **Increases accessibility and the patient will be sent to a pharmacy providing the service.**
If signposted, patients may have to figure out who is providing the service (the referral route should provide a more joined-up patient journey).
- **If the patient does not contact the pharmacy, the pharmacy team will follow up with the patient.**
If signposted, this will not happen as the pharmacy won't be aware that the patient was meant to visit the pharmacy. The patient may not receive the care they require.
- **If the patient does not meet the clinical pathway gateway point, the pharmacy can still treat the patient under the minor illness pathway.**
If signposted, the pharmacy may only be able to offer an OTC medication(s) if the clinical pathway gateway point is not met.
- **Improved Patient Access and Convenience:**
 - Timely Care:**
 - Digital referrals enable patients to access care more quickly and conveniently, potentially reducing wait times for appointments.
 - Reduced Travel:**
 - Patients may be able to access care at a local pharmacy, avoiding the need to travel to a GP surgery.

Benefits for GP Practices

- **There is an auditable trail of referral and clinical treatment, including consultation outcome.**
If signposted and treated under the Self-Care Essential Service, no records are made or sent back to the GP practice.
- **Referral data can show that patients are being actively supported to access appropriate treatment, evidencing that GP practices are meeting other PCARP requirements.**
If signposted, this data is not captured.

- **Referrals to pharmacies increase capacity within GP practices – more appointments available for patients with higher acuity needs.**
If signposted, patients may not attend the pharmacy and will continue to present at the GP practice.
- **Reduced Pressure on GP Services:**
 - **Freeing up GP appointments:** *by managing minor illnesses at pharmacies, GPs can focus on more complex and urgent cases.*
 - **Improved GP efficiency:** *digital referrals allow GPs to allocate their time more effectively, focusing on patients with higher acuity needs.*
 - **Reduced overcrowding:** *reducing pressure on GP surgeries can improve patient experience and reduce overcrowding.*

Benefits for Pharmacies

- **The pharmacy team can proactively contact the patient upon receipt of referral to arrange a time for the patient to speak to the pharmacist – beneficial to patient and pharmacy workload.**
If signposted, the patient may present at a time that means they may have to wait to be seen by the pharmacist.
- **The pharmacy will receive patient information on the referral therefore ensuring they are informed of the presenting condition.**
If signposted, the patient will have to talk through their presenting condition, provide other information again, which may be frustrating for the patient and does not present a joined-up patient journey.
- **Ensures pharmacies are paid for the service they are providing, which helps your local pharmacies remain open.**
If signposted and patients do not pass the gateway point for the clinical pathway consultation, the pharmacy will receive no payment for the Pharmacy First Service.
- **Streamlined Referral Process:**
Digital referrals ensure the pharmacist has all the necessary information about the patient's condition and reason for referral.
- **Enhanced Collaboration:**
 - Digital referrals facilitate collaboration between GPs and pharmacists, ensuring patients receive coordinated care.
 - Increased pharmacy visibility: digital referrals can highlight the valuable role pharmacies play in primary care.

Benefits for the NHS

- **Cost effectiveness:** managing minor illnesses at pharmacies can be more cost effective than GP consultations.
- **Improved NHS efficiency:** reducing pressure on GP services and hospitals frees up resources for more acute care.
- **Data and reporting:** digital referral data can be used to track the effectiveness of the service and inform future improvements.