



The winter months can present many challenges and issues for GPs and their practice teams. From flu epidemics, increased patient demand, extreme weather conditions and the threat of breach notices, practices can find this time of year very stressful. It's best to plan early and try and prepare for every eventuality winter might throw at you. Furthermore, it's essential to have a business continuity plan in place to make sure your practice can provide a level of service at all times.

Be prepared

Check list:

- Business continuity plans are reviewed and updated and contact details for local health organisations are correct.
- Plans are in place to ensure the identification of high risk community based patients and to profile their care management over the extended holiday period appropriately.
- The practice telephone divert arrangements are updated for the bank holidays.
- If the practice uses a fax, the fax is operational throughout. Remember that the use of faxes will be phased out by March 2020.
- Changes to access times are clearly advertised on NHS Choices, your practice website and in the practice. If you use a pre-recorded telephone message, use this to remind patients about changes for the holiday period.
- Ensure the availability of sufficient anticipated repeat medications.



ACTION: Appoint a practice winter planning 'champion' to lead in your practice.



Flu outbreak

You need to plan for the impact of a flu pandemic or epidemic in the practice. You should establish the policies to be implemented and allocate resources to protect practice staff and patients during the outbreak.

Ensure that you communicate to and educate your employees, co-ordinate with external organisations and help your community.



ACTION: Identify your contacts in Public Health England and NHS England London and read and action the Government's pandemic flu checklist for businesses. Although this checklist was produced in 2011, it is still relevant.

Unforeseen closure

Get ready now. Review and develop your business continuity plan to ensure the practice can be open in times of bad weather, travel disruption or holiday periods.



ACTION: Check your practice telephone message always provides helpful advice to patients and make sure you divert practice phones to your out of hours provider.

Bad weather – Make sure that you have plans in place to let patients know how they can access primary care services, whether it's at your own or a neighbouring practice.



ACTION: Ensure that you demonstrate that you made an effort to open even if you were unable to in bad weather and inform NHS England London immediately if you cannot open.

Transport disruption – Work with out of hours providers, neighbouring practices and your local federation to ensure a skeleton service is available to patients during periods of extreme weather; share practice team mobile numbers so that you can communicate even if the practice is closed; and have a plan in place to ensure that someone can make it in to the practice to guide patients if there is transport disruption.

Unscheduled disruption to practice telephone systems - Ensure there is a practice mobile telephone number that is staffed during core hours for patients to contact if necessary. See if your provider can automatically divert calls to this system.



ACTION: Ask your CCG if they have a poster you can display for patients explaining what to do if the practice is closed.



Christmas and New Year reminder

Normal working – Don't forget that in the run up to Christmas and New Year's Eve, **all days excluding Christmas day (25 December), Boxing day (26 December) and New Years day (1 January) are normal working days.** Commissioners will expect that practices remain open and telephones are answered as usual, plus GPs and other clinicians are available as on any other working day, unless alternative arrangements have already been agreed with your local commissioning team.

Practices that are usually open over weekends will also be expected to provide normal services as usual on Saturday 28 and Sunday 29 December 2019, unless they have already made alternative arrangements with their commissioning team.

Remember, the practice is only closed on Wednesday 25 and Thursday 26 December 2019 and Wednesday 1 January 2020.

Don't forget to double check that your business continuity plans are up to date with correct contact information and that at least two practice members have a hard copy with them at home in case of an emergency at the premises. Finally if your practice uses a fax, don't forget to leave it on with a full stocked paper drawer and enough ink.

Extended hours over the holiday period - If you usually provide extended hours services under the (DES) on a Tuesday, you may wish to move these hours to another day within the Christmas and New Year period instead of operating them on 24 and 31 December 2019. Again, you should liaise with your local commissioning team regarding this if you haven't already done so.

If you usually provide extended hours services over a weekend, these should continue as normal on 28 and 29 December 2019 unless you have already agreed with your commissioners to move them to another day(s) within the Christmas and New Year period. If you are making changes to your extended hours services that have been approved by your Area Team, please ensure that these are clearly communicated to patients both on your website, on NHS Choices and within the practice.



ACTION: Make sure your patients are aware of any closures in advance through surgery notices and reception staff.

Prescriptions – Ensure that you have clear information in the practice and on your website relating to prescription arrangements for the holiday period. Also don't forget to check whether any of your vulnerable or high risk patients need additional medication at this time.

- Remind patients to ensure they have medication to cover their needs, especially if they are going to visit family in other parts of the country, or abroad.
- Advise patients that the last day prescriptions need to be submitted for collection is by close of business on Monday 23 or Monday 30 December 2019.
- Display information about when local pharmacies are open during the holiday period.

Also, let patients know if there will be any changes to your normal processing procedure for prescriptions that are requested on: 19,20, 23, 24, or 27 December 2019.



ACTION: Ensure that arrangements are in place for repeat prescriptions to be ordered and collected to avoid requests over the period of practice closure.

WINTER PLANNING GUIDANCE

October 2019



Inform patients – If you haven't already done so, ensure that clear patient information regarding your opening hours, prescribing deadlines and how patients can access primary medical care when you are closed, are visible in the practice, on your website and NHS Choices page, and on your front door (if applicable).

You should also clearly identify how patients can access essential services when you're closed, and what to do in an emergency, via your telephone message.

Finally, you might like to consider producing a patient information sheet giving all of the above information as well as:

- Information on what to do in an emergency
- Contact details and opening hours for Urgent Care/Treatment Centres, Minor Injury Units, Walk-in Centres, etc
- Opening hours of any local GP hub provision over the holiday period
- Local pharmacy opening rota
- Local dental out of hours provision



ACTION: Pre-recorded telephone messages should be changed to reflect your out of hours arrangements. Follow best practice by sharing this information with your CCG and NHS England London to ensure that you are not issued with a breach notice.

Managing patient expectations and demand

Patient demand can be higher in winter and the number of acute presentations can increase during the winter months. Be prepared for patients presenting with a wider range of seasonal ailments than normal. Also, be aware that pharmacies may experience problems with access to supplies which could have a knock on effect on patients attending the practice.



ACTION: Work with your LMC, CCG and federation to get the right message out to your patients in order to manage expectations and demand.

Additional guidance

Visit the <https://gpsoe.org.uk/gpsoe/> website to download [resilience guides](#), [template letters](#) and [patient facing posters](#) for your practice.

'Self Care' leaflets highlighting minor ailments that can be treated at home such as coughs and colds can be displayed in a prominent place within the practice and can be added to your website. More information can be found [here](#) and [here](#).



Remember: Share any issues you face when planning for winter through our [BEAM to LMC app](#).

