

The winter months can present many challenges and issues for GPs and their practice teams. From flu epidemics, increased patient demand and extreme weather conditions, practices can find this time of year very stressful. It's best to plan early and try and cover 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 and a team member is scheduled to check that the phones are still working properly over the course of the bank holiday period.
- The practice NHS Net account is regularly checked and the practice fax is operational throughout.
- 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.
- In the weeks before the bank holiday period, highlight to patients the need to plan for sufficient repeat medication to cover them for the bank holiday period, including information on pharmacy opening times during the period.

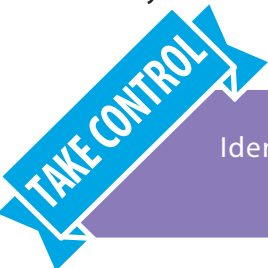


Appoint a practice winter planning 'champion' to lead in your practice.

## Flu outbreak

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

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



Identify your contacts in Public Health England and NHS England London and read and action the Government's [Pandemic flu checklist for businesses](#).

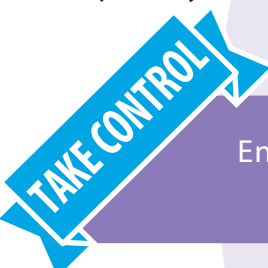
## Unforeseen closure

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.



Check your practice answerphone 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.



Ensure that you demonstrate that you made an effort to open even if you were unable to in bad weather. Inform NHS England London immediately.

- **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 for patients to contact if necessary.



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

- **Early closure and holiday period opening times** – Demand for services at bank holiday times, particularly Christmas Eve, is usually low and regulations now allow both GMS and PMS practices to subcontract services to an ‘appropriate provider’. Guidance also permits closure with adequate (one month) notice and approval from NHS England.

During the holiday period, you have four basic options:

1. Premises remain open and telephones are answered throughout core hours. GPs and other clinicians are available as on a normal working day.
2. Premises remain open and telephones are answered throughout core hours. Administrative and clinical staff capacity is reduced, but services are still provided by practice clinicians. No sub-contracting takes place.
3. Premises close early but telephones are answered throughout core hours and practice clinicians are available to meet reasonable patient need. Patients must be informed of these arrangements and there must be a clear message visible to patients turning up at the practice, giving instructions on how to obtain access to clinical advice.
4. Premises close early and telephones are switched over to a sub-contracted service, eg, a commercial out of hours provider.

If choosing options 3 or 4, practices must notify NHS England London of these arrangements and may have to provide assurance to them that these arrangements are satisfactory.



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



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



Answer phone 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.



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

The following guidance may be of interest when planning business continuity for winter 2016/17:

- [NHS England has issued guidance for GP practices regarding Christmas and New Year 2017](#) and NHS England's expectations of general practice availability over that period. Guidance also permits closure with adequate (one month) notice and approval from NHS England London.
- [GPC guidance](#) from previous years should be read in conjunction with the NHS England letter.
- The CQC (Care Quality Commission) have a "[mythbuster](#)" on opening hours.
- Visit the [GP Resilience: Take Control](#) website to download other [resilience guides](#), [template letters](#) and [patient facing posters](#) for your practice.

## Notes