

These are unprecedented times.

On the 25th March the Chief Dental Officer published the third letter of preparedness which advised all NHS and private practices to stop all routine dental treatment and face to face contact in light of the Covid 19 pandemic. All dental practices from that point should only be offering telephone triaging by way of remote consultations. If this advice proves unsuccessful then a referral to an Urgent Dental Care centre would be appropriate via a tier 2 triage service. The Local Dental Committees across the East of England worked with NHS England to develop an NHS emergency patient pathway to help deal with those urgent dental cases.

What do we have in Norfolk?

Currently there are 4 centres treating asymptomatic urgent patients and one centre offering care for those who are symptomatic across the county. All other dental practices can only operate a remote consultation service which includes initial advice, appropriate analgesics and antibiotics if required. The dentists can escalate a referral for urgent care if the problem does not respond or treatment is deemed urgent or an emergency.

During this pandemic, it is important we protect ourselves, our staff and our community from any significant risks. We are grateful to the volunteer dentists and their teams who have come together to provide a safe 7 day a week NHS urgent dental service for the community. Our ultimate aim is to save lives, reduce the risk of COVID -19 transmission in the community and provide appropriate urgent treatment to those who need it.

Can I be seen if I am infected, or living with someone who is infected with COVID -19?

NHS England have designated one 'hot' COVID -19 urgent care centre in the county where your patients will receive the same excellent level of level care. All the Urgent Dental Care centres are equipped with appropriate PPE to treat the patients safely although, as you will have read or seen on the television, obtaining this has been one of the greatest challenges.

Can patients go straight to the Urgent Care Centre?

No. The number of patients who can be seen at an urgent care centre each session is about 4 although some centres have sufficient capacity of staff and surgeries to increase that number. It is therefore essential that a second tier of triage takes place to only refer those with the greatest need on to an UDC centre which has appointments available and is of the correct 'hot' or 'cold' designation.

If your patient satisfies the criteria for urgent treatment the referral will be passed to the UDC centre and the staff at that centre will contact them to arrange an urgent appointment. The pathway for referral is laid out in the Standard Operating Procedure published by the East of England Area Team together with the chairs of the LDNs. The referral spreadsheet and Appendix 4 Word document were also circulated with the SOP and it is these documents that should be sent with a referral. These documents were developed rapidly in response to the CDOs guidance and have had to be amended to recognise the changing nature of this pathway.

Is nhs.net the only means for making a referral?

The nhs.net service is a secure network and consequently the favoured means of transferring confidential patient information. Some NHS and many private dentists don't have an nhs.net account. Details of how to request an account are in the SOP but if you have an urgent referral you want to make without an nhs.net address it has been recommended that you buddy with a colleague who has one - often a neighbouring practice will help under these circumstances.

Is the pathway the same for patients of a private practice?

Yes the pathway is for all patients

Does the patient pay for treatment they receive at an Urgent Care Centre?

If they are exempt from NHS charges, the treatment is free. If they pay NHS charges, the normal standard urgent treatment costs (£22.70) apply.

We would like to thank all the Dentists and their teams including dental nurses, therapists, hygienists, receptionists and practice managers who have volunteered to work in various aspects of the patient pathway to look after patients who need urgent dental care. Many have also volunteered to work in other sectors like the Nightingale hospital. We are all proud to be part of this journey to treat the community and the population during this pandemic.

Stay Home, Save Lives. Protect The NHS