

# Telephone helplines

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To understand how to use the NHS Direct telephone helpline to get advice on common symptoms
- To know that there are other telephone helplines
- To understand the type of information that will be requested



## RESOURCES

- Copies of Resources 1A and B, 3 and 4
- Scenario cards prepared from Resource 2
- Copies of Resource 5 (Activity 4 Support and ESOL)
- Telephone directories and local newspapers with helpline information

- Audio equipment [🔊16–18](#)
- Audio scripts
- Highlighter pens

## RELATED THEMES

NHS Choices website (pages 73–81)  
Emergency calls (pages 118–127)

### HEALTH SKILLS

There are many sources of help and advice that are now available on the telephone. Although for many people the first reaction is to contact their local GP practice or clinic when they have a health problem, an increasing number of people are becoming aware of the benefits of using telephone helplines such as NHS Direct. These enable people to receive professional advice at any time of day or night and in many cases replace the need to visit the doctor, or hospital A&E departments.

It is important that learners understand what services are available to them online and on the telephone. It is also important for them to anticipate the type of information that will be requested when they phone for advice, and understand the sort of help they will be given.

#### Related health information

[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/)  
[www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/) (an index of common health conditions)  
[www.helplines.org.uk](http://www.helplines.org.uk) (the Helplines Association, with information about finding specific helplines)

### SKILLS FOR LIFE

In order to use NHS Direct and other telephone helplines, learners need to be able to:

- understand how to access these services
- anticipate and plan what information they will be asked to give
- listen and respond to questions and advice.

#### Core curriculum

Activities in this theme will contribute to learning in the following curriculum areas:

- find out what will be needed in order to answer questions on the phone ([L](#)Rt/L1.1)
- locate information from written text ([L](#)Rt/L1.5)
- listen and respond to questions from medical practitioners ([L](#)SLc/E3.3, SLc/E3.4).

- Introduce the topic by explaining that although the GP or the hospital are there to deal with our health issues, there may be times when using other support services such as the Internet or telephone helplines may be a better way to deal with immediate needs.
- Talk about times when people may feel ill, worried or concerned and would benefit from speaking to a knowledgeable person over the phone.
- Encourage learners to suggest scenarios. These can be personal or generalised depending on the group and their relationship with you and with each other. It may be useful to suggest some scenarios to get the group started. These might include:
  - a person feeling ill in the middle of the night or outside normal surgery hours – at weekends or bank holidays
  - a person with a problem that they need to discuss confidentially with someone who is not directly involved
  - an emergency situation
  - a person who just needs more information about a health issue
  - a person who needs to speak to specialised support about a particular condition (e.g. a terminal illness, a problem such as drug abuse, financial problems)
  - a person who feels they have no one else to turn to for advice or support.

*Have you ever been ill (or had someone in the family that was ill) in the middle of the night and needed to talk to a health expert?*

*Are there times when you think people might like to talk to a stranger about specific problems?*

#### ACTIVITY 1

##### Understand what helplines are available

- Check learners understand what you mean by helplines.
- Ask learners for the names of any helplines they are already aware of. Display these. These might include NHS Direct, AIDS, mental health, ChildLine, and Samaritans.
- Use Resource 1A and 1B to discuss some of the telephone helplines that are available, and how to find the numbers. 1B refers to PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service) which is a locally-based service. You will need to determine the relevant local service for your learners. Note that the PALS website is for professionals only.
- Explain the key points about the NHS Direct service and make sure learners can locate the number. Encourage learners to keep a note of it. Also point out the use of the emergency number 999 (or 112, which is the European emergency number and can also be used in the UK).
- Suggest learners look at a telephone directory and try to locate the helplines page. Some local newspapers contain this information. An internet search for 'helpline' plus the specific group or condition (e.g. carers) will also come up with some ideas. Make these sources available to learners as appropriate.
- Read and discuss information about various helplines that may be relevant to the learner group.
- Give pairs or small groups of learners scenario cards prepared from Resource 2. Ask them to discuss the scenarios, decide on the appropriate helpline and locate the number.
- Check and discuss answers. Ask learners to make a note of numbers that are important to them. Emphasise that if they are not sure

*What telephone helplines do you know?*

*Where can you find other helpline numbers?*

who to contact, NHS Direct or their local PALS will be able to advise them and give contact details.

### Support

- Learners may need support to scan for headings and key words in directories and other sources. Ask direct questions about the scenario (Resource 2) to establish the type of information they are looking for. Restrict the amount of information learners need to access. Give more straightforward scenarios to begin with.
- Check that dyslexic learners are able to copy and dial telephone numbers in the correct sequence. Give strategies for remembering numbers. For example, the NHS Direct number is 08 (same beginning as most helplines) followed by 45, 46, 47 (numbers in sequence).

### ESOL

- Learners may need support with vocabulary. Encourage them to work out the meaning from the context (e.g. 'What do you think common health problems means?' 'Which word tells you that you don't pay for the phone call?'). Give simple explanations of unfamiliar words (e.g. 'resolve a problem' means to find a solution).
- Learners may like to add some notes on Resource 1 about each service in their first language.

## ACTIVITY 2 16

### Prepare for a call to NHS Direct helpline

- Give out Resource 3 and discuss the questions. Draw out anything learners already know about the NHS Direct helpline.
- Use Resource 4 as an information source to answer the questions as a group or in pairs. Use the answers as a focus for discussion.
- Play the audio clip of the NHS Direct helpline recorded message. Discuss the information and the implications for confidentiality.
- Ask learners to work in groups to make a checklist of the sort of information they will need when making a call to NHS Direct. Key points for the checklist should include:
  - personal details (name, telephone number and postcode)
  - details about the person you are calling about (if calling for another person)
  - what the call is about
  - a description of the symptoms, when they started and how they affect you (or the other person)
  - what you or the other person have tried already
  - any drugs you or the other person are taking
  - any existing medical conditions
  - any other relevant details.
- Go through these points and ask learners to offer examples of the sort of information required for each one. Ask for strategies for preparing the information and remembering what to say.

*Do you have any experience of using the NHS Direct helpline?*

*How helpful did you find it?*

*What information do you think you will be asked for?*

*Why do you think call handlers need so much information that is not about the symptoms?*

## Support

- Learners may need support to go through the information on Resource 4 and to identify the key points to remember. Use a highlighter pen to identify the important points before listing them. Ask learners to describe each item in their own words and write these down for them.
- Learners can work in pairs for support.
- Note that some learners, especially those with transient lifestyles, may not know their postcode and you may need to discuss strategies to deal with helpline operators' requests for this information.

## ESOL

- As you go through the list of points, discuss useful phrases. For example: (point 2) 'It's about my (daughter)' (point 4) 'She's got (earache)'; 'She feels (sick)'; 'It started / came on (yesterday)' (point 5) 'She's taken / I've given her (painkillers)'.
- Give learners practice in giving their personal details – name, phone number, address, doctor's details. Provide feedback on clarity, speed and spellings.

### ACTIVITY 3 17

#### Listen to a call to NHS Direct helpline

- Explain to learners that they are going to listen to a phone call to the NHS Direct helpline. Play the conversation once through for gist and ask learners for general comments about what the problem is. They may wish to comment on the symptoms or the advice given.
- Discuss the importance of clear communication. Play the conversation again, pausing at intervals to discuss the questions asked and the responses. (Places to pause are marked on teacher's version of the audio script.) Use the checklist developed in Activity 2 to tick off items such as personal details – name, telephone number, postcode.
- Ask learners to comment on the clarity of the communication.
- Listen to the conversation again to confirm points raised.

## Support

Learners may need support in listening for specific information. Be prepared to replay sections several times. Provide copies of the audio script (learner version) and highlighter pens on second listening so that learners can listen for and mark text.

## ESOL

Deal with the two parts of the conversation separately (call handler and nurse). For each one, follow these steps:  
Step 1: set the context  
Step 2: discuss likely content with learners  
Step 3: play it through providing questions to help learners understand the gist  
Step 4: play it again in short sections (as often as necessary) pausing to discuss the details  
Step 5: go through the audio script, focusing on useful expressions.

### ACTIVITY 4 18

#### Practise responding to questions

- Explain that you are going to play an audio clip of the call handler's questions, but without the caller's answers. Explain to learners that they will be responding to the questions themselves.

*Why is it important to speak clearly?*

*What could you say if you don't understand?*

#### TIP

Learners may like to make a personal checklist of key information (e.g. address, postcode, medical history, medicine taken).

*Can you think of a time when you might need to ring the NHS Direct helpline?*

- Ask learners (as a group or individually) to consider a similar scenario when they need to phone the doctor for their young son, who is ill. Ask them to decide what the symptoms are and to create a name and other details if necessary. Learners may want to revisit their checklist and note down information so that they are ready to respond. Play the audio clip, pausing after each question to allow learners to respond as a group or individually.

### Support

Hand out Resource 5 and go through the questions with learners one at a time. Make notes about the answers and practise responding.

### ESOL

- Hand out Resource 5 and work with a volunteer to model how to answer the questions.
- Set up pairs. Allow time for learners to discuss a scenario and decide what to say. When they are ready, encourage them to practise the call. Ensure that learners swap roles.

### Action

- Suggest that learners create a list of helplines that will be relevant to them. They can keep this list by the telephone at home.
- Learners should also develop a checklist of their own personal information and update this when necessary.
- Further role plays of emergency situations, as well as asking for advice about health matters could be useful.

*Which helplines would be useful to you?*





What can I do if I feel ill or have health concerns? Should I always go to the doctor?

How can I find out more about local services or other support organisations?

## Call *NHS Direct* 0845 4647 to:

- talk to someone about common health problems
- find out about local doctors, dentists or late-night pharmacies
- get information about self-help and support organisations.

**NHS**  
**Direct**

• [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)  
• Telephone 0845 4647

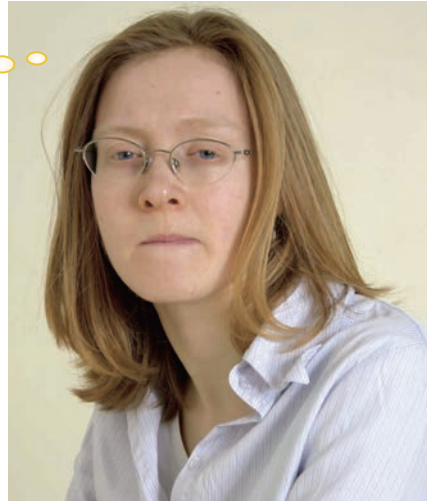
Available 24 hours



What do I do in an emergency?

If you need to contact the police, fire service, ambulance or coastguard in an emergency: **dial 999** or 112.

Where else can I get confidential advice?



## PALS

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service

PALS provides:

- confidential advice and support to patients, families and carers
- up-to-date information about the NHS and health-related matters
- help to resolve problems and concerns quickly
- explanations of complaints procedures and how to contact someone who can help
- information about how to get more involved in your own health care and NHS locally
- an opportunity to give feedback about health services.

If you want to contact your local PALS:

- Phone your local clinic, GP surgery, health centre or hospital and ask for details of PALS
- Phone NHS Direct 0845 4647.

Some helplines are listed in the telephone directory.

Some of these are *Freephone* numbers (0800 and 0808).

Freephone calls are free on landlines and most mobiles. 0845 numbers are usually charged at local rate.

*Freephone* numbers are not shown on most telephone bills.

You can also contact many helplines by using the Internet:

Cancer helplines

Search

### National helplines

#### Carers

■ Carers Line  
T Freephone 0808 808 7777

#### Emotional support

■ Samaritans  
T 08457 90 90 90

#### Drugs

■ Frank  
T Freephone 0800 77 66 00

#### Family

■ Parentline Plus  
T Freephone 0808 800 2222

# Telephone helplines

## RESOURCE 2

1

You are worried that a friend has an alcohol problem. Where can you get some advice about this?

2

Your mother is in hospital and you are unhappy about the care and treatment she is receiving. Is there someone you can call to talk about this?

3

It is late at night and your child has a high temperature. He has been unwell for most of the day but now seems worse. Who can you call for advice?

4

You have a hospital appointment at a hospital 30 miles from your house. You don't drive and there is no public transport to get you there on time. Is there someone you can ask for help with transport?

5

Everything is going wrong: you have split up with your partner, you have money problems and you have lost your job. You feel desperate and alone. Who can help?

6

You have a long-term condition that you have been told cannot be treated. You hear of a new treatment that may help. How can you find out if this is available on the NHS?

7

You are a long-term carer for a child with a severe disability. You need a break. Who can you call about this?

8

You call in on your elderly mother and find her unconscious at the bottom of the stairs. Who do you call?



# Telephone helplines

RESOURCE 3

Can I call the NHS Direct helpline at any time?

What will they ask me?

Do I need to give my name?

Can I make a call for someone else?

How much will the call cost?



Is the service confidential?

What sort of advice will they give me?

If I'm ringing about a health problem, will I need to give details about the symptoms and previous medical conditions?

## How do you use the *NHS Direct* telephone service?

Call the *NHS Direct* telephone service on **0845 4647** at any time of the day or night. You will be asked to provide some basic information about yourself and to describe the nature of your call. If you need advice about a health problem, you are asked if you are calling for yourself or on behalf of someone else and are asked to explain:

- what the symptoms are, how they affect you or the person you are phoning for, and when they began
- what you or the person have tried already
- any drugs you or the person are already taking
- any existing medical conditions
- anything else you think is relevant.

If you are calling to help someone else, that person needs to be in the same room as you so that the nurse can assess their symptoms accurately. *NHS Direct* nurses will use their skills and experience, together with information from a computer system, to advise you on the best course of action to take.

*NHS Direct* calls are charged at the local call rate on BT landlines. Other landlines and mobiles may have different charges.

# Telephone helplines

RESOURCE 5



**Call handler:** You're through to NHS Direct South West. I'm your call handler. Are you phoning for yourself or somebody else?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** That's fine. I need to take some details. What's your telephone number?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** Does the patient have the same telephone number?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** Could I have your postcode, please?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** Could you repeat your postcode?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** And the patient's name?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** Can you spell that for me?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** What's your son's date of birth?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** Just a few more questions ... What's the name of your GP?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** And the practice?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** Now, can you tell me what's wrong with your son?

**You:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Call handler:** Thank you. I'm now going to hand you over to a nurse who can deal with your questions.

## ACTIVITY 1 / Resource 2

Answers may vary according to the information you have.  
Suggestions:

- 1 Alcohol – Drinkline 0800 917 8282
- 2 PALS (local number)
- 3 NHS Direct 0845 46 47
- 4 NHS Direct 0845 46 47 or PALS (local number)
- 5 Samaritans 08457 90 90 90
- 6 NHS Direct 0845 46 47 or PALS (local number)
- 7 Carers Direct (NHS) 0808 802 0202
- 8 999 or 112

## ACTIVITY 2



**Recorded message:** Thank you for calling NHS Direct.

When your call is answered, we will ask you to provide some personal information, including details of any medicines you may be taking. If you would like to know how the NHS protects your information, please press 1. Health information and advice is also available at [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk). Otherwise please hold to speak to someone who can help.

## ACTIVITY 3



### Teacher version

**Recorded message:** Thank you for calling NHS Direct.

When your call is answered, we will ask you to provide some personal information, including details of any medicines you may be taking. If you would like to know how the NHS protects your information, please press 1. Health information and advice is also available at

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk. Otherwise please hold to speak to someone who can help.

*pause – discuss instruction*

**Call handler:** You're through to NHS Direct South West. I'm your call handler. Are you phoning for yourself or somebody else?

**Mrs Begum:** Somebody else.

*pause – refer to checklist*

**Call handler:** Fine. I need to take some details. What's your telephone number?

**Mrs Begum:** My number's 01392 554432.

**Call handler:** Is the patient on the same number?

**Mrs Begum:** I'm sorry, I didn't hear your question.

*pause – discuss that it is OK to ask questions or ask for clarification*

**Call handler:** Does the patient have the same telephone number?

**Mrs Begum:** Yes, it's my six-year-old daughter.

**Call handler:** Could I have your postcode, please?

**Mrs Begum:** EX23 1PN.

**Call handler:** Can I check your postcode? Is that N for November?

**Mrs Begum:** Yes.

*pause – discuss checking details*

**Call handler:** And the patient's name?

**Mrs Begum:** Neela Begum. I'm Mrs Begum – her mother.

**Call handler:** Is that spelt N-e-e-l-a?

**Mrs Begum:** Yes, that's right.

**Call handler:** What's Neela's date of birth?

**Mrs Begum:** It's 10th December 2000.

*pause – discuss how to give dates and the need to be clear*

**Call handler:** Just a few more questions ... What's the name of your GP?



**Mrs Begum:** Dr Lake.

**Call handler:** And the practice?

**Mrs Begum:** East Fordton.

**Call handler:** Now, can you tell me what's wrong with Neela?

**Mrs Begum:** She keeps being sick.

**Call handler:** Thank you, Mrs Begum. I'm now going to hand you over to a nurse who can deal with your questions.

*pause – point out that this is usual practice*

**Nurse:** Hello, Mrs Begum. I'm Nurse Peters. How can I help you?

**Mrs Begum:** I'm worried about my daughter – she keeps being sick.

**Nurse:** Has she been vomiting for long?

*pause – discuss vocabulary*

**Mrs Begum:** Um ... how long?

**Nurse:** More than a day?

**Mrs Begum:** No, she started this morning, so I didn't send her to school.

**Nurse:** Do you think she has a fever? Have you taken her temperature?

**Mrs Begum:** Yes, her temperature seems normal, but she looks pale.

**Nurse:** Is the vomit dark brown or is there any blood in it?

**Mrs Begum:** No, I don't think so.

*pause – discuss whether Mrs Begum answered the question*

**Nurse:** Has Neela got bad tummy ache?

**Mrs Begum:** She says it does hurt, especially when she's being sick.

**Nurse:** Does she have diarrhoea as well as being sick?

**Mrs Begum:** A bit – not much.

**Nurse:** Is anyone else in the family sick?

**Mrs Begum:** No, only Neela.



**Nurse:** Has Neela eaten anything you haven't eaten?

**Mrs Begum:** She had a takeaway last night – it might have been that.

**Nurse:** It might be something she's eaten, but for now what you need to do is give her water to put some fluid back in her body. Not too much at once – give her little sips every 15 minutes or so. Give her more after two hours. After about eight hours you can start giving her a little food, but nothing fatty or spicy. Let her rest and she should be better soon. Have you understood all that, Mrs Begum, or would you like me to repeat anything?

*pause – discuss long instructions – what should Mrs Begum do to check her understanding?*

**Mrs Begum:** I think I understand. I need to give Neela water – a bit at a time – and food after eight hours. Thank you very much.

**Nurse:** Now if Neela gets worse or other symptoms develop you can always call NHS Direct again, but you could get in touch with your GP. Is there anything else you would like to ask?

**Mrs Begum:** No, thank you.

**Nurse:** Thank you. Goodbye.

**Mrs Begum:** Goodbye.

## ACTIVITY 3



### Learner version

**Recorded message:** Thank you for calling NHS Direct.

When your call is answered, we will ask you to provide some personal information, including details of any medication you may be taking. If you would like to know how the NHS protects your information, please press 1. Health information and advice is also available at [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk). Otherwise please hold to speak to someone who can help.

**Call handler:** You're through to NHS Direct South West. I'm your call handler. Are you phoning for yourself or somebody else?

**Mrs Begum:** Somebody else.

**Call handler:** Fine. I need to take some details. What's your telephone number?

**Mrs Begum:** My number's 01392 554432.

**Call handler:** Is the patient on the same number?

**Mrs Begum:** I'm sorry, I didn't hear your question.

**Call handler:** Does the patient have the same telephone number?

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**Call handler:** Could I have your postcode, please?

**Mrs Begum:** EX23 1PN.

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**Call handler:** And the patient's name?

**Mrs Begum:** Neela Begum. I'm Mrs Begum – her mother.

**Call handler:** Is that spelt N-e-e-l-a?

**Mrs Begum:** Yes, that's right.

**Call handler:** What's Neela's date of birth?

**Mrs Begum:** It's 10th December 2000.

**Call handler:** Just a few more questions ... What's the name of your GP?

**Mrs Begum:** Dr Lake.

**Call handler:** And the practice?

**Mrs Begum:** East Fordton.

**Call handler:** Now, can you tell me what's wrong with Neela?

**Mrs Begum:** She keeps being sick.

**Call handler:** Thank you, Mrs Begum. I'm now going to hand you over to a nurse who can deal with your questions.

**Nurse:** Hello, Mrs Begum. I'm Nurse Peters. How can I help you?

**Mrs Begum:** I'm worried about my daughter – she keeps being sick.

**Nurse:** Has she been vomiting for long?

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**Nurse:** More than a day?

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**Mrs Begum:** No, I don't think so.

**Nurse:** Has Neela got bad tummy ache?

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**Nurse:** Is anyone else in the family sick?

**Mrs Begum:** No, only Neela.

**Nurse:** Has Neela eaten anything you haven't eaten?

**Mrs Begum:** She had a takeaway last night – it might have been that.

**Nurse:** It might be something she's eaten, but for now what you need to do is give her water to put some fluid back in her body. Not too much at once – give her little sips every 15 minutes or so. Give her more after two hours. After about eight hours you can start giving her a little food, but nothing fatty or spicy. Let her rest and she should be better soon. Have you understood all that, Mrs Begum, or would you like me to repeat anything?

**Mrs Begum:** I think I understand. I need to give Neela water – a bit at a time – and food after eight hours. Thank you very much.

**Nurse:** Now if Neela gets worse or other symptoms develop you can always call NHS Direct again, but you could get in touch with your GP. Is there anything else you would like to ask?

**Mrs Begum:** No, thank you.

**Nurse:** Thank you. Goodbye.

**Mrs Begum:** Goodbye.

## ACTIVITY 4



**Call handler:** You're through to NHS Direct South West. I'm your call handler. Are you phoning for yourself or somebody else?

**You:**

**Call handler:** That's fine. I need to take some details. What's your telephone number?

**You:**

**Call handler:** Does the patient have the same telephone number?

**You:**

**Call handler:** Could I have your postcode, please?

**You:**

**Call handler:** Could you repeat your postcode?

**You:**

**Call handler:** And the patient's name?

**You:**

**Call handler:** Can you spell that for me?

**You:**

**Call handler:** What's your son's date of birth?

**You:**

**Call handler:** Just a few more questions ... What's the name of your GP?

**You:**

**Call handler:** And the practice?

**You:**

**Call handler:** Now, can you tell me what's wrong with your son?

**You:**

**Call handler:** Thank you. I'm now going to hand you over to a nurse who can deal with your questions.