

## Rheumatology - First Outpatient Appointment

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the NHS ability to provide routine elective services. We recognise that patients are waiting longer than we would all like and it is not always possible to identify when treatment will take place. This document provides you with information on how you are able to support yourself while waiting to attend the hospital. The guidance has been written by clinicians who are responsible for your care.

When you are waiting for further treatment it can sometimes feel like a long wait. The information and advice here is aimed at helping you manage that wait so you arrive for your appointment in the best possible physical and mental health.

The NHS has limited resources which means that we are unable to treat you as quickly as we would like. Each healthcare provider has to consider the type of help you need, how quickly you need treatment, the best course of action to help you and when and where you can be seen.

The process of sorting patients based on their individual needs is called prioritisation. The system of prioritisation is applied consistently across the NHS to help us to decide the order in which patients receive their treatment. This is essential to ensure that we provide care based on need. The system means that care is delivered in the fairest way possible.

Once a referral has been made from primary care to secondary care, the specialist team conduct assessments and then agree with you on the right course of action. At this stage, the urgency will be assessed. If you have a long-term health condition, for example, you may need treatment faster than someone without.

The Rheumatology service aims to provide comprehensive and individual care for patients with inflammatory joint conditions and connective tissue disease.

We recognise the importance of responding to the individual's needs and respecting privacy, dignity, beliefs and values. We aim to maintain or improve the quality of life for our patients and their carers. We work within the wider multi-disciplinary team keeping the patient as the central focus of all care planning and delivery.

Our clinical expertise and practice is based on a core of professional knowledge and skills supported by current research and founded on professional values. We endeavour to share our expertise through the education of patients, their carers and other health professionals.

The service is delivered on an outpatient basis by an experienced, consultant-led multidisciplinary team which provides assessment, diagnosis and non-surgical management of these different conditions. When on-going care and support are required this is provided by the most appropriate members of the team. We

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are very aware that these conditions can have a huge impact on a person's life and our aim is to always consider the whole patient, not just the disease itself.

We provide:

- Specialist diagnostic and treatment services for patients with all forms of rheumatic complaints.
- A monitoring and management service for patients with inflammatory arthritis taking medications that require regular blood checks.
- A rehabilitation service for rheumatology patients with physical disability, in conjunction with other therapists and specialists.
- An on-call service providing a specialist rheumatology opinion to patients admitted to the hospital under the care other specialties.
- Provision for people with osteoporosis.
- Participation in health care research trials.
- A teaching service for trainee rheumatologists, GPs and other health professionals.
- Patient Education and Support groups.
- A Support nurse for patients with Lupus.
- Combined clinics with other specialists e.g. dermatologists, respiratory or spinal surgeons for patients with complex problems.

## Guidance for Patients

How to make the most of your consultation

- Check your appointment letter carefully to make sure you have the right date, time and place.
- Ask for an interpreter or communication support if needed.
- Ask a friend or family member to come with you, if this would help you.
- Write down details of your symptoms, including when they started and what makes them better or worse.
- Write down your two or three most important questions.
- List or bring all your medicines and pills – including anything you buy over the counter such as vitamins and supplements.
- Think about the clothing you are going to wear so that you feel comfortable and so that it is possible for you to have a medical examination easily.
- Arrive in good time so you do not feel anxious.

## What should I do if my health is deteriorating?

If your symptoms get worse this is known as a 'flare-up'

A flare is unpredictable and may start suddenly. It can last for hours, days, or even months if not treated. A flare may result in:

- Increased swelling
- Worsening pain
- More joint stiffness

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- Increased tiredness
- Feeling generally unwell or feverish
- Decreased appetite

Sometimes a flare may follow an infection, such as a chest or urinary infection. In this case it is advisable to consult your GP as you may require treatment for the infection. During a flare you may need to:

- Adjust some of your medication. Taking painkillers and/or anti-inflammatory tablets regularly should help control and minimise the pain. Never exceed the maximum recommended dose. You should continue to take all your other medication as normal.
- If you are taking steroid tablets, it is important that you do not alter the dose without consulting your GP first.
- Anti-inflammatory gels may be applied locally to the affected joints following the manufacturer's instructions There are other things you can do to help yourself which can soothe painful joints:
  - Rest or exercise? During a flare it is important to pace your activities. This means planning the day, taking into consideration your increased tiredness. You may need to take short rests in between activities but remember to keep those joints moving. This reduces stiffness and maintains muscle tone. You may be reluctant to exercise flaring joints, but it will help.
  - Wearing wrist splints may help reduce pain by keeping the joint in a neutral position. Try to avoid putting pressure through an inflamed joint.
  - Relaxation, distraction or imagery may help. This may include listening to music or picturing yourself in a pleasant environment Heat therapy includes wheat bags, a hot water bottle or electric heat pads (make sure these are wrapped in a towel so as not to burn yourself) and place on the painful joint or even having a warm bath or shower.
  - Cold therapy includes wheat bags, bag of frozen peas, bag of ice cubes, gel pack or a bowl of water with ice cubes for hands or feet. Make sure these are wrapped in a towel before placing on your joint. Hold and cold treatments should be applied for up to 15 minute intervals, with the exception of iced water where 5 minutes is acceptable.

Support groups and further information:

- Arthritis Care & Research : [www.versusarthritis.org](http://www.versusarthritis.org)
- The Psoriasis and Psoriatic Alliance: [www.papaa.org](http://www.papaa.org)
- National Ankylosing Spondylosis Society: [www.nass.co.uk](http://www.nass.co.uk)
- Lupus UK: [www.lupusuk.org.uk](http://www.lupusuk.org.uk)
- Scleroderma Society: [www.sclerodermasociety.co.uk](http://www.sclerodermasociety.co.uk)
- British Sjogrens Syndrome Association: [www.bssa.uk.net](http://www.bssa.uk.net)
- Vasculitis UK: [www.vasculitis.org.uk](http://www.vasculitis.org.uk)

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- Back Pain: Low back pain and sciatica

<https://www.sheffielddachesandpains.com/back-and-neck/home/>

<https://backcare.org.uk/>

### Urgent Health Advice

For urgent health advice about physical or mental health, when it's not an emergency, please call 111 from any landline or mobile phone. You can also visit [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk). The NHS 111 service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

### Life Threatening Emergencies

For something life threatening – severe bleeding, breathing difficulties or chest pains – please dial 999.

### Contact Us

If you have been referred and have a query about your appointment please contact the appointments line:

Poole Hospital: 03000 19 5288

Christchurch Hospital: 03000 19 4740 (option 4)

If you have concerns relating to your condition or treatment, which cannot wait until your next appointment, you can call the Rheumatology Advice Line for advice and support from a member of the Rheumatology Practitioner team. If we are busy we may be unable to answer your call immediately, so please be prepared to leave a brief message.

Christchurch: Tel 0300 019 5302

Poole: Tel 0300 019 2849