

Quick Reference Guide for Patients – Referrals for specialist services

A referral is a written request from a healthcare provider (usually your GP) asking a specialist to help with your health issue. They can be for tests, advice, treatment, or ongoing care.

Why is a referral needed?

- A referral helps ensure that you get the right care from the right specialist at the right time.
- Referrals provide the specialist with relevant medical history, current condition and reasons their expertise is required so they can provide targeted and effective care.

What does a referral cover?

- A referral is for a single course of treatment for a patient's specific condition or concern. This includes the initial consultation and follow-up care.
- A new referral may be needed for a new or unrelated condition.

How long do referrals last?

- A referral starts from the day you attend the first specialist appointment (not the date the referral is written).
- Referrals from a GP are usually valid for 12 months (they can be shorter, longer, or indefinite – discuss with your doctor the most appropriate referral for your situation).
- Referrals from your specialist to another specialist are valid up to 3 months (or sometimes longer if you're admitted to hospital).

What are indefinite referrals?

- GPs can write referrals for ongoing care, if necessary.
- Indefinite referrals must clearly say 'indefinite', 'ongoing', or 'continuing care'.
- A new referral is needed for a new or unrelated condition.

Does my referral need to name a specific specialist?

- In most cases, referrals don't need to name a specific specialist. If a specific specialist is named in a referral, you can still choose to see a different specialist in the same specialty.
- If you are seeing a specialist in a public hospital outpatient service and have chosen to be seen as a private patient, the referral must name that specific specialist.

Changing specialists

- A referral is valid only for the specialist who accepts it.
- A new referral is needed to see a different specialist (i.e. if you want to seek a second opinion).