Which? Shorts: how to get the most from an NHS GP appointment

[00:00:00] **James Rowe:** Hello, this is Witch Shorts, the podcast that every week gives you a taster of one of our magazines all for free. Now, every Wednesday, I pick up one of our mags, find something that I find really interesting, and then bring it to life. Now, this week I found a piece that Laurel Ives wrote for the July issue of Witch Magazine, all about GP appointments.

[00:00:29] **James Rowe:** Now, I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that these appointments can feel rushed, and it can seem hard to get one in the first place, but let me tell you that a bit of preparation can make all the difference. Here's Laurel's piece adapted for the podcast this week. Read by me James Rowe.

[00:00:48] **James Rowe:** From the 8:00 AM scramble to confusing online forms and the rise of telephone assessments. Seeing a GP has become a frustrating experience for many. A recent survey by the King's Fund reported a steep drop in satisfaction with GP services. Just 31% was satisfied in 2024 compared with 68% five years beforehand.

[00:01:10] **James Rowe:** Patient numbers are on the rise while a number of GPS has fallen. Meanwhile, the pandemic has reshaped how surgeries operate. Telephone appointments almost doubled between 2019 and 2024, and face-to-face consultations dropped from 81% to 66% according to a report by the independent Think tank. The Institute for Government, Dr.

[00:01:32] **James Rowe:** Rosie Kahn is a GP in Hemel Hempstead. She said Hospital waiting lists are longer, so we're caring for people for longer while they wait. Also, patients have more complex issues, but the 10 minute slots haven't changed where often overrun. The government recently announced new funding to recruit more gps.

[00:01:50] **James Rowe:** But for now, knowing how to get the most from your appointment can make a big difference. So first things first. How do you get an appointment to begin with? This is often many people's top complaint. Many practices do release same day slots at 8:00 AM but that can lead to long phone cues according to Dr.

[00:02:07] **James Rowe:** Khan. Some surgeries give out these appointments in person, so turning up early when the doors open can be an option. But do check with your surgery first. Others offer these appointments on the NHS app sometimes shortly beforehand, or hold back some slots to release later in the day. To spread the demand for non-urgent problems that don't need a physical exam.

[00:02:28] **James Rowe:** An online formal phone appointment may be quicker. Many surgeries use a QRX or eConsult to check your practice's website. For example, if you've got a persistent rash, upload a photo using eConsult, says Dr. Kahan. And if you prefer to be seen in person, say so. Patients can absolutely request that they say.

[00:02:48] **James Rowe:** And don't overlook other professionals who can help too. Many practices have clinical pharmacists, practice nurses and physiotherapists on hand that can deal with minor illnesses, medication queries, or blood pressure checks often more quickly than a GP can. Now, once you're in the room, how can you make the most of your slot?

[00:03:09] **James Rowe:** Well, GP appointments are short, usually just 10 minutes, so preparation does help. If you have several concerns, jot them down in advance. That way you and your GP can decide what to prioritize. When we focus on one issue, we can explore it properly says Dr. Kahan. Trying to cover too many things often leaves patients feeling unheard.

[00:03:28] **James Rowe:** Next, think through your symptoms when they started, what affects them and how they impact your life. And be sure to bring a list of medications and recent hospital letters or test results. Dr. Camilla Stockholm, an author and GP in Exeter says, don't assume that your GP knows your full history. From a quick glance at your notes, some information may be missing or badly coded.

[00:03:53] **James Rowe:** A brief summary of the main issues can be helpful. One useful prep method is ICE or ICE, which stands for ideas, concerns and expectations. It's how gps are trained to structure consultations, and it can help you clarify what you want from your appointment. Describe your symptoms clearly. Instead of saying, I feel tired, say I slept for eight hours, but I still wake up feeling exhausted if something hurts, explain how it feels like stabbing pains gives more information than just it hurts.

[00:04:25] **James Rowe:** Also be honest. Dr. Conn says, if you're not taking your medication, drinking too much or struggling mentally, say so, we're here to help, not judge. Don't be embarrassed if you cry. Doctors have seen and heard everything says Dr. Clara, a Doran, a GP who's worked in Edinburgh for 20 years. We've all been patients too, they say with so much health advice available online these days.

[00:04:51] **James Rowe:** Doctors say people often arrive convinced of a specific diagnosis or with a treatment in mind. Dr. Doran says, patient research is great, but sometimes it fuels anxiety. If you've read something, share it. But try to stay open minded. Changes to your lifestyle, such as managing your sleep, stress levels, exercise or diet can be as important as prescriptions.

[00:05:14] **James Rowe:** There's strong signs showing patients have more control over their health issues than they realize says, doctor Stockholm, don't take offense. If your GP suggests non medication options. If a referral is needed, your GP might first request blood tests or other checks. It's part of the process, and they have to justify sending you onwards too.

[00:05:34] **James Rowe:** If things can't be resolved in one visit, ask to book a follow-up. And while it can be frustrating and tricky, if you're unwell and have been waiting ages, be polite where human too says Dr. Stockholm. People under pressure respond better to kindness instead of a face-to-face appointment. You may be offered one over the phone or online.

[00:05:55] **James Rowe:** These consultations can be convenient, especially if you're less mobile. You work or look after children, but they can also feel rushed and are often shorter than face-to-face appointments. To get the best from your phone or video appointment, choose a quiet place where you can speak freely and as you would for an in-person appointment.

[00:06:11] **James Rowe:** Write down what you want to discuss in advance. If you feel you weren't heard or need an exam, ask for a face-to-face Follow-up. In any case, if you don't feel happy with your gp, you can ask to see another one at the practice or register with a different one entirely for formal complaints. Each surgery has a published procedure.

[00:06:30] **James Rowe:** Check with the reception staff or the practice's website. However, it may be better to try and resolve it in person first. If it isn't resolved, contact your local integrated care board or get help from the NHS complaints, advocacy, or the patient's association.

[00:06:53] **James Rowe:** That brings to an end another podcast from Witch. There's loads more for you to read about everything we discuss today. Just head to the episode description for more useful everyday advice. There you'll also find an exclusive offer for podcast listeners like you to become a witch member for 50% off the usual price, giving you access to our product reviews, our app, one-to-one, personalized buying advice, and every issue of which magazine across the air.

[00:07:15] **James Rowe:** Plus your membership helps us to make life simpler, fairer, and safer for everyone. If you'd like to know when we release a new episode, then make sure you press subscribe wherever you're listening. That way you can be one of the first to listen. And for any questions, comments, or anything in between, follow us on social media at which UK or email us Podcast, at which do co uk goodbye.