



# THE DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU NOW...

With NHS waiting lists longer than ever, we explain why you should be prioritising health check-ups over trips to the salon

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**H**aircut and colour? Check. Manicure? Check. Eyebrow and upper lip wax? Check.

Since lockdown restrictions began lifting in April, it's likely you've been working your way through a list of longed-for treatments – perhaps even treating yourself to a deep tissue massage or spa day for good measure! But what about that much-needed GP appointment you've been putting off for months? Or that overdue smear test you should have had before the pandemic hit? Or that toothache you've been ignoring for the last year? If you've not rushed to schedule those dates into your diary, read on to discover why you need to stop putting your health on the back-burner and start checking in with your body right now.

## WHAT LIES BENEATH

While there's nothing wrong with having beauty therapies to help you look and feel better, the simple truth is you should be prioritising vital health checks over visits to the beautician now that restrictions are lifting.

'For many people, appearance is highly important,' says Dr Belinda Griffiths, general practitioner at Fleet Street Clinic (fleetstreetclinic.com). 'However, while looking good is all very well, some health issues might

not be evident until it is too late. Externally, a woman may appear to be fine but, internally, what is happening?' According to Dr Griffiths, the pandemic has caused many people to miss medical appointments or have them postponed, or avoid getting their health checked altogether for various reasons, including increased anxiety, fear and embarrassment. Indeed, the latest Referral to Treatment statistics from NHS England show that 4.7 million people are currently on the waiting list for NHS treatment as of the end of February this year – the highest statistics since records began in August 2007.

With waiting lists so long, you might be forgiven for thinking that delaying your health check-ups a little longer could help the NHS free up vital resources as it continues to battle coronavirus. However, this mindset could be detrimental to your health in the long term. 'Putting off health check-ups or ignoring symptoms means that the problem, whatever it is, will likely get worse,' explains Griffiths. 'Very few health problems will clear up on their

own without causing any damage. Unfortunately, we are seeing a rise in late diagnosis which, if diagnosed earlier, would have a more positive outcome. The worst-case scenario is that curable diseases such as breast cancer, cervical cancer and melanoma are being left so long that they are no longer curable.'

## CHECK IT OUT

There are many kinds of health checks that women have missed over the past 14 months, from breast, mole, eyesight, hearing, dental and contraception checks, to cervical smear tests, mammograms and general blood tests for thyroid, cholesterol or diabetes issues – not to mention that expectant mothers have attended fewer health checks throughout their pregnancies compared to their pre-pandemic peers.

On top of this, says Griffiths, many women are putting their jobs and the health of family and friends before their own needs, meaning they are 'ignoring mild pain and discomfort, not investigating new gastrointestinal problems such as bloating or indigestion, and not seeking

*'4.7 million people are currently on the waiting list for NHS treatment'*

support for fertility issues and mental health concerns, the latter of which has resulted in an increase in the number of people experiencing anxiety, depression and OCD.'

If you've put off making an appointment with your GP, or you've ignored a letter from a healthcare professional inviting you to a regular check-up or screening, the message couldn't be clearer – book in as soon as possible because the longer you delay, the longer you may have to wait to see a specialist following the pandemic. And if you find you have difficulties in getting a face-to-face appointment with your NHS GP, Griffiths advises that you should 'consider seeing a private GP, or resorting to calling 111, especially if you are experiencing symptoms of any kind'. It's time to put your health before everything else.

## DENTAL HEALTH

According to the British Dental Association, 19 million fewer dental appointments were undertaken in 2020, leading to a dramatic rise in the number of patients suffering from gum disease and tooth pain. 'Dental work should be preventative, so it's been a real shock to see so many patients requiring extractions after lockdown,' says Dr Mervyn Druian of The London Centre for Cosmetic Dentistry ([londoncosmeticdentistry.co.uk](http://londoncosmeticdentistry.co.uk)). 'My immediate advice is that you must not hesitate to return to your dentist, where you'll be completely Covid-safe thanks to the dental industry's superior levels of hygiene and PPE. Adults should also routinely visit a hygienist every three to four months to maintain good oral health, be checked for signs of oral cancer, and reduce harmful bacteria-filled plaque build-up which can cause gum inflammation, tooth loss and other health issues in the body.'



## CHECK YOUR BREASTS

Early detection of breast cancer saves lives. Yet research from breast cancer charity, CoppaFeel! ([coppafeel.org](http://coppafeel.org)) shows only 36 per cent of women aged 18-35 regularly check their boobs. Here's what you need to know.

- You can check your boobs anywhere, in the shower, on the sofa, or while you're getting dressed – just make it part of your routine. If you notice anything unusual, monitor it for a week and then make a doctor's appointment.
- Boobs naturally change throughout your life, even each month, so get to know their natural rhythm. It's normal for breasts to hurt when you're on your period, but if the pain is different, get it checked.
- Changes to look out for include a thickening of tissue, lumps, a sudden change in size or shape, unexplained rashes or redness, and skin dimpling or puckering.
- Check your nipples for signs of being pulled in or changing shape, plus crusting or discharge. Remember to also check under your armpits and up to your collarbone.
- Sign up to CoppaFeel's free text reminder service by texting BOOBS to 70300.

## MENTAL HEALTH

Rising rates of anxiety and depression were amplified by the pandemic. A recent survey by leading health solutions company Simplyhealth ([simplyhealth.co.uk](http://simplyhealth.co.uk)) revealed that 42 per cent of UK adults felt their mental health had suffered since the outbreak of Covid-19. Unfortunately, while the way people think and talk about mental health has changed for the better, too many people still suffer in silence. 'One-in-four people will be affected by a mental illness, yet almost two-thirds will never seek help,' says Catherine Rutland, clinical director at Simplyhealth. 'If you break a leg, you talk about it. If you suffer from depression, the chances are you will keep it to yourself. It can take courage but seeking medical help is essential for understanding the causes of mental health problems, and for getting the support you need to treat and prevent them.'

## EYE HEALTH

Figures from private eye examination data and the General Ophthalmic Service have revealed that five million routine eye tests were missed during lockdown last year. 'After a year of extensive screen time, delaying an eye health check-up could be dangerous,' says Sharon Copeland, optician at Feel Good Contacts ([feelgoodcontacts.com](http://feelgoodcontacts.com)). 'Not only is it very difficult to know if you have a problem with one eye when the vision is good in the other, but undetected eye health issues could be detrimental to your vision, concentration and performance.' If you wear glasses or contacts, failing to get your eyes tested regularly also means your prescription may no longer be fit for purpose, which can lead to eye strain and headaches. Additionally, eye health checks can pick up on other conditions, such as diabetes or glaucoma, which can lead to blindness.

## HORMONAL HEALTH

Many women experienced disrupted menstrual cycles during lockdown. Persistent stress left us in a state of 'fight or flight', which encouraged the unregulated release of cortisol, which then suppressed levels of reproductive hormones in the body thus disrupting ovulation. 'The pandemic has encouraged women to acknowledge the connection between their mental, physical and hormonal health,' says Amy Thompson, founder of the Moody Month app ([moodymonth.com](http://moodymonth.com)), which allows women to track their health patterns connected to hormones. 'Once you understand that your body is rhythmical, hormonal and cyclical, you can track your menstrual cycle to obtain a greater understanding of your mood and health. And because menstruation has a beginning and an end, it's easy to monitor and spot potential issues.'

## MONITOR YOUR MOLES

Recent data\* shows there was a drastic decrease in skin cancer referrals and diagnoses in 2020, despite rates of melanoma more than doubling since the early 1990s. Get to know your moles with this advice from Dr Adam Friedmann, consultant dermatologist at Stratum Dermatology Clinics ([stratumclinics.com](http://stratumclinics.com)).

- Check your moles once a month, especially if you have lots of moles or freckles, have fair hair or skin, or have a family history of skin cancer.
- When checking moles, stand in a well-lit room and use both a full-length and a handheld mirror so you can check your body all over.
- Ask someone to help you check hard-to-reach areas, including your scalp, the soles of your feet and in between your fingers and toes.
- Look for any changes to the size, shape, or colour of moles, plus any itching, bleeding or crusting – all signs you need to get your moles looked at by an expert. 📞

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