Getting help from a general practitioner (GP) - doctor

General practitioners (GPs) are doctors who are trained to deal with any type of physical or mental health issue. They aim to keep their patients healthy by diagnosing and treating physical illnesses, injuries or mental health problems.

Doctors are widely available around Australia. They will keep your health issues private and their services are either free or at low cost. This means that seeing a doctor is a great place to start when you are concerned about any health issues including contraception, sexual health, drug or alcohol use, relationship problems, or feeling down or upset.

Finding a doctor

One way of finding a doctor is to ask your friends, family or someone at school or work who they would recommend. There might also be a medical centre in your area where you can simply drop in and ask about their services. You can also ask at headspace, look in the Yellow Pages, or search the internet. Schools, TAFEs and universities often know about local doctors, and sometimes have their own medical services.

Making an appointment

You’ll usually need to make an appointment to see a doctor, either by phoning or dropping into their medical practice. The receptionist doesn’t need to know the reason why you want to see the doctor. If it’s your first visit, you will probably have to provide some personal contact details.

If it’s an urgent problem, you should say so. If it’s very urgent and you can’t get an appointment, then go to a hospital Emergency Department instead.

Appointments are usually for 10-15 minutes. For your first appointment, or if you have a number of issues you want to talk about, ask for a longer appointment so you and your doctor both have plenty of time.

If you don’t feel comfortable on your own, it’s OK to take someone else to the appointment, whether it’s a friend, parent or relative.

Costs and medicare

When you make your appointment ask the receptionist about the costs of your visit. Many doctors ‘bulk bill’ the full cost of the consultation to Medicare, so you won’t have to pay anything. You will need to show a Medicare card or give your Medicare number to be bulk billed. You can use a parents’ or family’s card, or you might have your own card. With some doctors you will need to pay a small fee but with a Medicare card you will be able to get most of the money back later.

Australians over 15 years of age are entitled to have their own Medicare card. You can apply by filling out a form available at a Medicare office, or through the Medicare website (www.medicareaustralia.gov.au). Your doctor and some pharmacists might have forms as well.
What to expect when you visit a doctor

At your first visit the doctor will usually ask a range of questions to find out about you and how you are feeling. These might include your general health and lifestyle, your family background, how you are thinking and feeling, and how you are getting on at school/work/study and with your family and friends.

Doctors need to know about you as a ‘whole person’ so that they can understand the problem and give you the right advice. They are not prying into your life for no reason, and they are not making judgments about you.

The doctor might want to give you a physical check-up, for example by taking your blood pressure, heart rate and temperature, or examining other parts of your body relevant to your problem. A doctor cannot perform any type of physical examination unless you give permission.

The doctor will then discuss the problem, and what to do next. Make sure you understand exactly what is happening – ask questions if you need to - and find out exactly what you need to do to feel better.

Sometimes the doctor will ask you to come back for a return visit – for example, to check on your progress, discuss the results of any tests, or just to have some more time to explore the problem.

Changing doctors

It’s important to feel comfortable and safe with your doctor, so if it is not feeling right you can change to another doctor and ask that your medical records get transferred.

Confidentiality

All doctors have to keep information about their patients private. This means they cannot discuss your visit with anyone else but there are some exceptions.

If a doctor thinks you are likely to harm yourself or someone else, they have a ‘duty of care’ to make sure you stay safe so they may need to tell other people. There are also some circumstances by law that require doctors to share information.

If you want to know more about your rights to privacy and confidentiality ask your doctor to talk it through with you at the beginning of your first appointment.

For more information, and to find out how to get help, visit the headspace website: www.headspace.org.au