

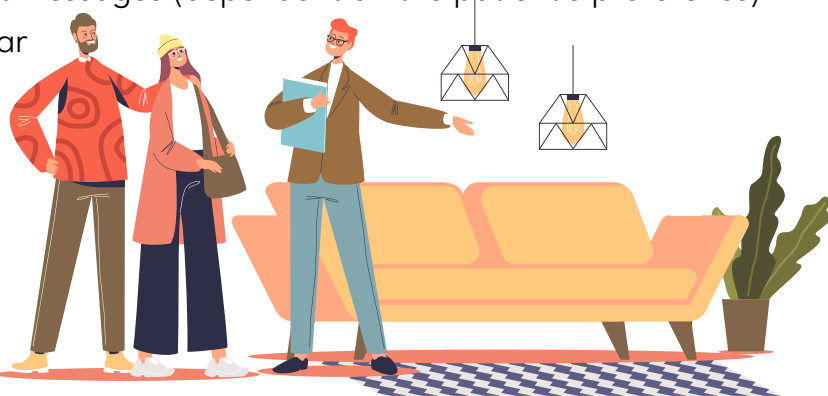


# **Autism-friendly appointments: Advice for healthcare providers**



## When making appointments

- Allow Autistic people to make appointments via SystmOnline, text and/or email, and provide the option for someone to call on their behalf. Many Autistic people struggle or are unable to speak on the telephone and this can pose an immediate barrier.
- This also applies to the appointment itself - for many Autistic people, the move to telephone appointments only has meant that they're unable to access primary care services at all. Offering video calls instead can help to mitigate this, but face to face appointments should be readily available for those who need them.
- Offer Autistic patients the option for a longer appointment time, to allow them to have more time and space to process and give them opportunity to ask questions, as well as reduce anxiety due to time pressures.
- Let patients know that they can write down their questions, concerns or requests in advance and either read them from a 'script' or ask the healthcare professional they're seeing to read them if they would prefer. This allows for patients to process their thoughts in a low-pressure environment and ensure they will remember to address all their issues at the time.
- Provide the option for Autistic patients to bring a buddy with them to their appointment to help mitigate the anxiety and fear that many Autistic people experience around healthcare.
- Send reminder letters, emails and/or text messages (dependent on the patient's preference) in the lead-up to the appointment, with clear information on how to change or cancel the appointment if needed.

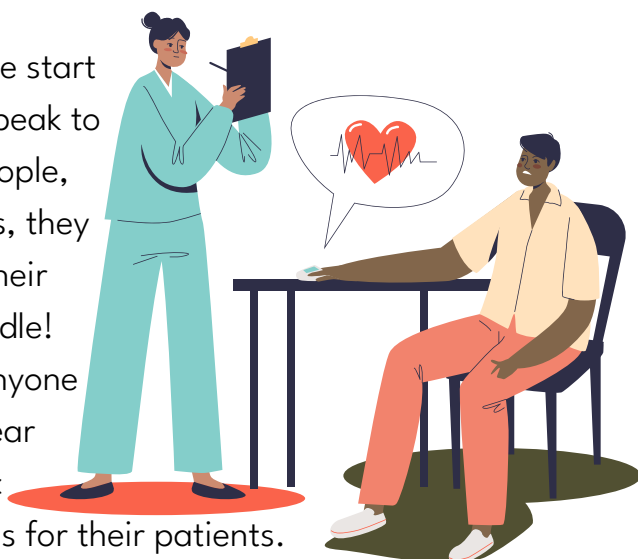


## In the waiting room

- Ensure staff are aware of the different ways that Autistic people communicate, and are able to communicate in the most appropriate way for each patient. Be aware that meltdowns and shutdowns are also methods of communication, and indicate that patients are feeling overwhelmed. Tools like Widgits or whiteboards are useful for Autistic people who are non-speaking, and specific signage about communication can help Autistic patients feel more at ease about their communication style.
- Set up a quiet, private waiting area and offer it to Autistic patients. They should be given the choice of where they would prefer to wait, but also not have to seek it out themselves. Providing stim toys and other sensory tools for Autistic patients to use while they're waiting and/or in their appointment is also helpful.
- Give Autistic patients the option to wear noise-cancelling headphones/earplugs and advise that you will slowly approach them and wave when their appointment is ready, rather than calling their name. Many Autistic people have to make the choice between sensory overload or anxiety over missing their name being called when at the GP practice.

## In the consulting room

- If they choose to bring someone with them, ask at the start of the appointment if the patient would like you to speak to them, their companion or both. For some Autistic people, all they need is the moral support whereas for others, they need their companion to speak and understand on their behalf, and for many it will be somewhere in the middle!
- It's equally important that GPs, practice nurses or anyone else that a patient may see at the surgery have a clear understanding of the different ways in which Autistic people communicate and provide a variety of options for their patients.
- Ask patients at the start of the appointment if they have written anything down in advance that they'd like to read to you, or like you to read. They should have been told when booking that this was an option, but may forget or feel too anxious to broach it when in the room.
- Speak calmly and clearly in short sentences and ask direct and closed questions, avoiding too many choices or too much information in one go. Wait for responses to questions and do not jump to repeat yourself, or ask in a different way, without giving them time to consider.
- Check thoroughly that the Autistic person really understands what you have said or asked - their verbal skills or agreement does not necessarily mirror their actual understanding of the information or request. Often, Autistic people will say that they understand because they don't want to be seen as difficult or because they recognise that's what's expected of them.
- Write out detailed step-by-step instructions and show the Autistic person and/or their companion what you want them to do while they are still in your office. Ask them if you would like for the instructions to also be emailed, posted and/or texted to them as well as given to them in a paper format, and ensure that if they request this that it is followed up on as soon as possible after the appointment.



## Post-appointment

- If Autistic patients require follow-up or monitoring of a longer term condition, provide worksheets or diaries to help them keep track of the information that will be required next time. Ask if they would like them to be sent via letter, emails and/or text and ensure that this is done as soon as possible after the appointment.
- Give Autistic patients the option to see the same GP/nurse/healthcare professional each time. If they are able to develop a rapport and feel comfortable with someone, Autistic patients are more likely to be open and honest with them and attend further appointments.
- Members of staff should help the Autistic person to schedule follow-up visits, referrals, or tests and contact them and/or their companion after the visit to remind them of any follow-up activities or appointments and give them the opportunity to get in touch if they have not been able to follow instructions or have follow-up questions.