

Family doctor/GP visits about your skin condition

How to make the most of your time with a doctor

If you have a skin problem or concern, you may likely visit your family doctor or general practitioner (GP)* for a diagnosis and treatment. Skin conditions are very common with an estimated 15 - 20% GP consultations relating specifically to the skin.

Appointments with your GP can be made by phoning the practice directly and speaking to the receptionist, or made online through some practice websites. In most cases, you need to book in advance, to speak with a member of your GP practice team.

Thinking ahead and doing a little preparation can help you get the most from your appointment, and the time that you and your GP have available, when you meet next. This can be helpful to both you and your GP when it comes to planning your care and treatment.

Whether this is your first appointment or you have attended previously, this short guide may help you in preparing for your next visit.



Before your appointment: 10 ways to make things easier



Think about what you would like to discuss with your doctor and make your most important concern the main priority, especially as GP consultations typically last 10-15 minutes.



Prepare a list of questions you would like to ask.



It may be helpful to write down specific details about your symptoms:

- What they are
- When they began (days, weeks or months ago)
- If they follow any pattern
- If they are made better or worse by anything
- How they affect your day-to-day life (e.g. sleep, concentration, work/study, leisure activities, relationships)



If your skin condition is having a negative impact on your quality of life[†], for example in terms of your physical, emotional or social well-being, it is important to consider sharing these feelings with your GP.



Your doctor may ask you about your family health history, including skin conditions. Some skin conditions have genetic links.



It may be helpful to bring a list of all your medications and tablets, including vitamins and supplements and any over-the-counter creams or ointments that you have been applying.

Sometimes, it might be useful to check with your pharmacist if it is possible to print a list of your most up-to-date prescribed medicines. Another helpful tip is to take photographs of the creams/ointments and tablet containers with your phone, so you can show them to the doctor.



You may wish to bring a pen and paper to make notes as a reminder of what the doctor said during the consultation.



If you feel that you would like extra support, and if appropriate, you may consider asking a family member or friend to attend with you, they may also help take notes for you and help you remember what the doctor discussed.



If it is your first appointment at the GP clinic, it is often a good idea to look up its location and plan how to get there. It may also be helpful to check local transport options or parking arrangements.



Some people find it helpful to take photos of their skin condition (especially when their skin condition flares). Having a photo of your skin, that was taken during a flare, can be useful to show your doctor what your skin looked like when the flare was active and can help the doctor's assessment.



On the day of your appointment:

1. It may be useful to bring some or all of these items to your appointment: medical card or GP visit card (if you have one), contact details e.g. your own mobile phone number and next of kin.

2. Allow plenty of time for your visit as the appointments of others, seen before you, may take longer or overrun.



During your appointment:

1. During your appointment your doctor may ask questions or talk about your symptoms, medical history, or (where appropriate) your response to treatment. Your doctor may also discuss whether you may need tests (e.g. blood tests) or the results of any previous tests.

2. It is important to tell the doctor about your current medications (including any complementary or alternative treatments that you might be taking), if you have any allergies and if you are pregnant.

3. Report any symptoms such as itch, pain, burning or stinging as well as anything else that may be worrying you. It is also important to mention any recent infections or illness.

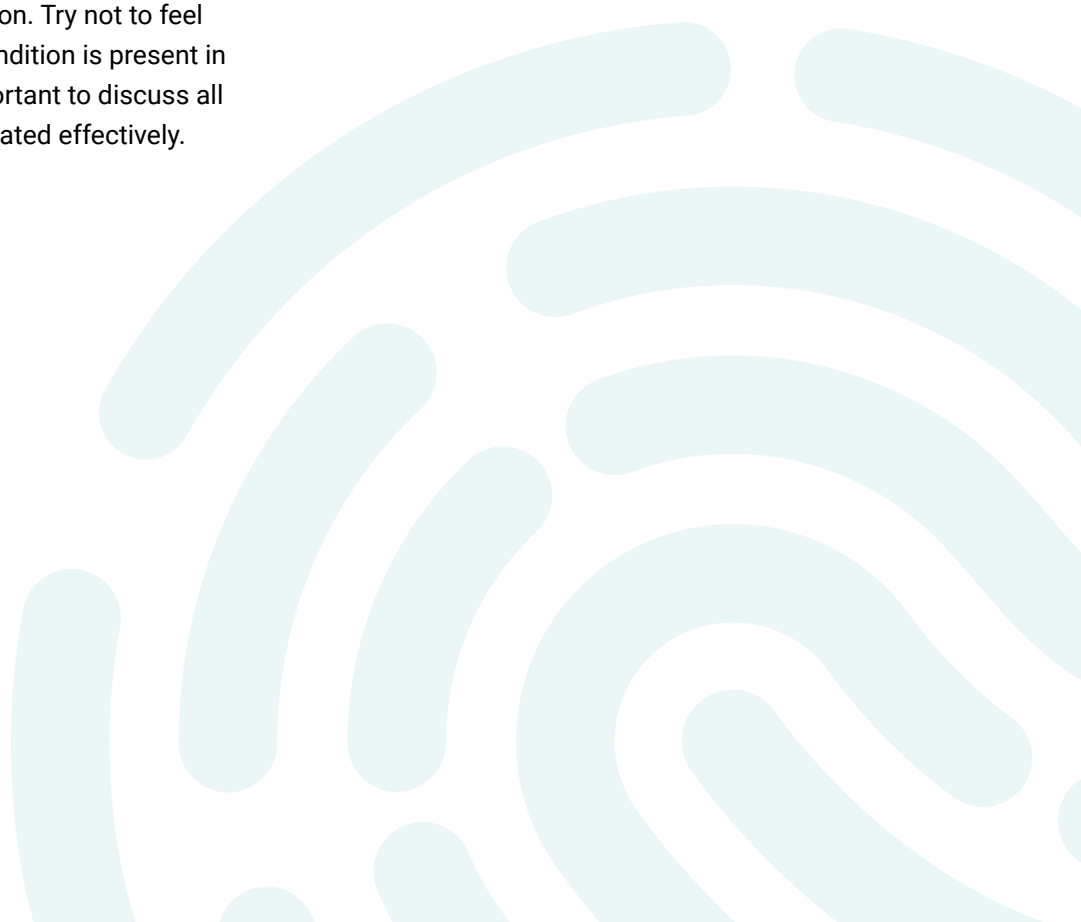
4. Your doctor may perform a skin examination, to help in their assessment of your condition. Try not to feel shy or embarrassed if your skin condition is present in a sensitive/intimate area. It is important to discuss all areas affected, so that it can be treated effectively.

5. Living with a skin condition can affect people in different ways, so try to be as open and honest as you can and don't be afraid to say how you really feel.

6. Discuss and identify your treatment goals with your doctor, so together you can decide a plan for ongoing care and treatment.

7. If you are having difficulty understanding anything that is being said, it is important to say this to your doctor. It is okay to ask them to explain or clarify something again, or write it down for you.

8. Remember to ask any questions that you have prepared in advance, or similarly anything that may have arisen during the consultation.





At the end of your appointment

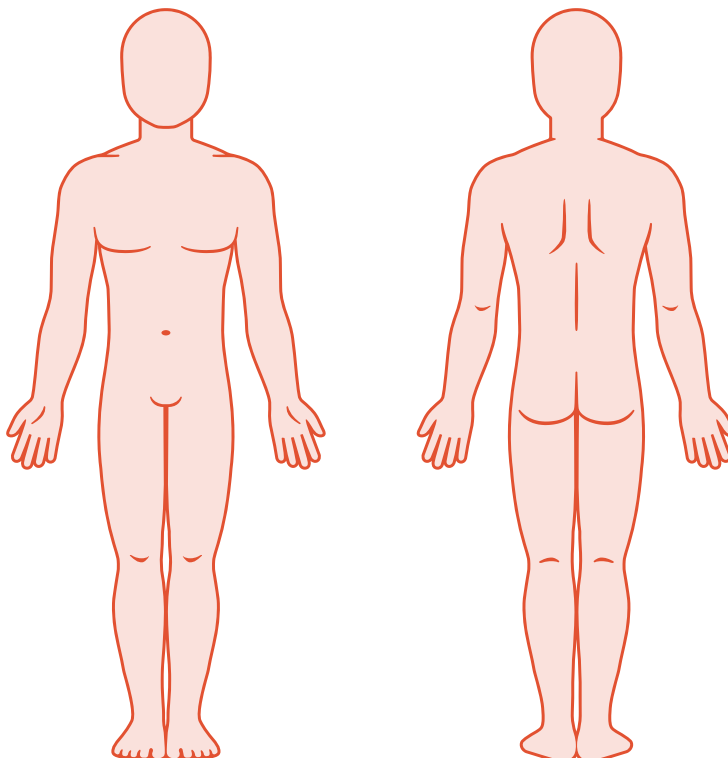
1. Ensure you understand the information shared during your consultation including any next steps or plans for further treatment.
2. Double check your treatment plan, your prescription and if there is a need for follow-up tests e.g. blood tests.
3. If your treatment plan involves applying topical creams or ointments, make sure you understand:
 - The strength of the cream or ointment
 - Where on the body it is to be applied
 - How much to apply and how often
 - How long to use it for (days or weeks)
4. Some other questions regarding prescribed treatments to keep in mind are:
 - How long before I notice an improvement?
 - Are any side effects likely?
 - How long will this course of treatment last?
 - Do I need to return for a follow-up appointment?
 - What do we do if there is no improvement?
5. If the doctor asks you to come back for another appointment, take a note of exactly when this will be, so that you know when you will be reviewed again.
6. If you have other health concerns, which you didn't get round to speaking to your doctor about during this appointment, make a plan together about how to address them later.
7. Remember to ask what is the best way to contact the GP practice, in case you have further questions about your treatment.
8. Many people can manage a skin condition themselves with the care and advice of their GP. However, for some with a more complex or severe form of a skin condition, or a suspected skin cancer, GPs may recommend a referral to a hospital-based dermatologist.
9. Continue to keep a record of your symptoms after your visit, this may be really useful as it can help track improvements, or if symptoms are becoming worse or more frequent. This record will be helpful if you have to go back to your doctor.
10. If for any reason you are unable to attend your appointment, it is important that you contact the GP practice as soon as possible to cancel and reschedule your appointment.



Body map: What areas of your skin do you want to talk about at your appointment

Skin conditions can affect any part of your body. This includes your hair, scalp, ears, nails, genitals, sensitive areas, the palms of your hands and soles of your feet.

You may find it useful to mark or shade-in this body map, to help indicate the areas of your body affected by your skin condition, to aid your discussion with your doctor or nurse during your next appointment.



What would I like to achieve during my appointment? (My appointment date and time is): _____

Questions that I would like to ask my doctor or nurse:

Notes:

*Family doctors or general practitioners (GPs) are often referred to as *primary-care* doctors, typically they provide health care services that you can find in your community and outside of hospitals. Hospital-based doctors (such as specialists like consultant dermatologists) are among a group of doctors often referred to as *secondary-care* doctors.

†Quality of life can be thought of as the extent to which a person is generally healthy, feels comfortable, and is capable of taking part in or enjoying life events. Living with a skin condition can affect people in different ways, so sometimes doctors ask patients to fill out a questionnaire such as the Dermatology Life Quality Index (DLQI), to help assess the impact.

Published by the Irish Skin Foundation.
Date of preparation: August 2023.

© Irish Skin Foundation 2023. All rights reserved.

The ISF is a national charity dedicated to improving quality of life for people living with skin conditions. We promote skin health and the prevention of skin disease by providing support, independent information, engaging in advocacy and raising awareness.

Irish Skin Foundation, Charles Institute of Dermatology, University College Dublin, Dublin, D04 V1W8, Ireland
tel: (01) 486 6280 | e-mail: info@irishskin.ie | www.irishskin.ie
Registered Charity Number: 20078706

