

Patient Information Leaflet

Second opinion

Introduction

You may request a second (or further) opinion if you are not satisfied with the advice you have received or the treatment that has been offered to you by your GP, consultant or other healthcare professional.

A second opinion can only be obtained by a referral from your GP. Although you have no legal right to a second opinion, GPs rarely refuse, unless there is sufficient reason and they do not think it is necessary.

The Royal College of General Practitioners Good Medical Practice for General Practitioners (2002) states that In general, you [the GP] should respect the patients request for a referral for a second opinion, although there may be circumstances in which you judge it not to be in the patients best interests to be referred.

If a GP refers you for a second opinion, it should be to a GP or consultant who they consider competent to deal with your case. Although you cannot insist on seeing a particular expert, you should not be referred to someone you do not wish to see.

Why is it necessary?

It is important that you (the patient) and your family/carer have all the information needed about your illness or condition, and that this information is understood. It is also important that you have confidence in the person providing the information.

Patients, their family or carer are sometimes asked to make an important decision regarding treatment options. In this case it is quite common for a second opinion to be requested so that the diagnosis and all possible treatment options can be fully understood. A patient may want to know the prognosis (prediction of the probable course, outcome and likelihood of recovery from a disease) before proceeding with the recommended treatment.

How does it work?

A second opinion may be requested by:

- You, the patient - you may have doubts about the first diagnosis or suggested course of treatment and may like an alternative diagnosis/course of treatment to be investigated. You may simply require confirmation from another doctor.
- Your carer or a relative (this must be with your consent).
- GP - if your GP is unsure about a diagnosis, they may refer you to a consultant or another GP. They could be found negligent if they fail to do this and you suffer as a result.
- Consultant - it is fairly common for a consultant to ask for a further opinion from a colleague if a case is particularly complicated.

You may request a second opinion after you have seen your GP, consultant or other health professional.

Second opinion from a GP:

If you are not happy with the advice you have been given by your GP, and would like a second opinion, you have three options:

- If you are registered with a multi-GP practice, you can ask to see another GP in the practice.
- Your GP can write a letter referring you to a GP in another local practice.
- Your GP can write a letter referring you to a private GP, which you may have to pay for.

You may at any time ask to register with another GP practice. However, the practice is under no obligation to accept you on their register.

Second opinion from a consultant or specialist:

A specialist is a doctor who has chosen and trained in a speciality area, e.g. paediatrician, surgeon, gynaecologist. Your GP will refer you to the specialist in your geographical area, who has the most expertise and is most appropriate for you. A specialist will only see you with a letter of referral from your GP. This letter will give the specialist essential background information on medication, previous treatments and anything your GP would like considered.

If you would like a second opinion on any recommended treatment, your specialist or GP will usually be prepared to arrange this. Or you may ask your consultant to do a consultant-to-consultant referral.

If you want to see a private specialist, you should get a referral from your GP. But if you see a private specialist without a GP referral, your GP is not obliged to accept the specialist's advice.

Second opinion from a dentist:

Your dentist should explain to you the advantages and disadvantages of any treatment they recommend, and tell you about any alternatives that are available. With this information you will be able to make a decision about whether or not to have the treatment.

You can ask your dentist to refer you for a second opinion if you are unsure about a treatment plan. Your dentist will refer you to either a hospital or to a Dental Reference Officer for the second opinion. Although you are always free to ask another dentist for a second opinion, the NHS does not cover this option, so you may have to pay a private charge if you choose to do this.

Advantages

A second opinion may clarify the original diagnosis and suggested course of treatment. If the two experts agree it will reassure you and increase your confidence in your GP, consultant, or other healthcare professional, as well as giving you more choice about who will carry out the recommended treatment. Other things such as geographical location, waiting times or personal recommendation may also affect your decision.

Even if the two opinions are different, this will give you more options, as well as giving the GP, consultant or other healthcare professional feedback on diagnosis and the opportunity to consider alternative treatment.

If you decide to undergo the treatment recommended by the second GP, consultant or healthcare professional, you must obtain a formal referral from the person who provided the original opinion.

Complaints

If you are having difficulty obtaining a second opinion, you can contact your local PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service) or your local Citizens Advice Bureau (see Selected Links).

Disadvantages

If you request a second opinion, you should be aware that this will not take priority, and there may be a long wait.

A second opinion with a different consultant could be at a different hospital, which may involve some travelling.

Recommendations

Your GP, consultant or healthcare professional, should check your understanding, explain any medical terms and provide an opportunity for you to ask questions. Any information should be summarised, written down and supported by published information if available. You should have any fears or concerns listened to, and receive emotional support for yourself and your family, if appropriate.

Before asking for a second opinion, it is worth noting that your dissatisfaction with the first opinion may be down to

a communication failure between you and your GP, consultant or healthcare professional. Asking them to explain things to you again may easily rectify this its often helpful to make a list of questions before you see them or ask someone else to accompany you who can ask questions on your behalf. If you can do this then there may be no need to obtain a second opinion.

If you are unhappy with your diagnosis or you do not understand the advice you have been given, go back to your GP or consultant and ask them to explain anything you are not sure about. If you would like an alternative course of treatment to be considered then discuss this with your GP.

Selected links

[PALS](#) (Department of Health)

[Citizens Advice Bureau](#) (CAB)