

News release
15 December 2025

Pressure on local NHS services increasing – how to get the care you need

NHS services in our area are coming under intense pressure as flu cases surge this week, while COVID, winter vomiting bugs and other respiratory illnesses like RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) are all adding to the strain. Flu levels are expected to peak between 19 and 23 December, in what some commentators are calling a 'flunami', while the number of patients seriously ill with flu in hospital beds across Hertfordshire and west Essex is rapidly increasing.

In the last week of November, ambulance crews in the East of England took almost 10,000 patients to hospitals, while NHS 111 took more than 48,000 calls. Early winter figures, published in the first of this year's [weekly urgent and emergency care pressure reports](#), show demand already running at extremely high levels.

Across England, the number of people in hospital beds with flu has jumped by 55% in just the past week. Not only are we seeing a week-on-week rise, but levels are also far above this time last year — more than 40% higher.

To protect yourself and your family from the misery of avoidable illness and ensure that NHS services are there for those who need them, local NHS leaders are calling on everyone in our area to take these simple steps:

- Make sure you are up to date with flu, COVID, and RSV vaccinations, which are especially important for older people, those with underlying health conditions, and pregnant women. Visit the [Hertfordshire and west Essex vaccination hub](#) for more information on who is eligible and how to get your vaccine. Get vaccinated now so that viruses don't spoil your Christmas and New Year plans.
- If you have sickness and diarrhoea, stay at home, get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids. Reduce the spread by washing your hands frequently with soap and water – hand gels won't kill norovirus. Stay off school or work and stay away from care homes, hospitals and social occasions until you've been clear of symptoms for at least two days.
- If you have a respiratory virus then rest, drink plenty of fluids, and use over the counter medicines if needed. Avoid close contact with vulnerable people, keep indoor spaces airy, and wear a mask when around others. Practice good hygiene such as coughing into your bent elbow or use a tissue and dispose of it afterwards in the nearest bin. Continue to wash your hands frequently with warm water and soap.
- Get quick and easy health advice from your pharmacist. High street chemists give patients access to prescription-only medicines for common conditions including sore throat, sinusitis and earache.
- If you can, use the NHS App to check for test results, order repeat prescriptions and contact your GP.

National survey results show that more than four in ten (42%*) people in the East of England have gone to A&E for a non-emergency issue because they thought it would be quicker to get medical support. 1 in 10 have visited A&E for a sore throat and a similar number have visited with symptoms of a cold (8%*). These are minor conditions that can be diagnosed and treated by a community pharmacist.

Dr Fiona Head, Medical Director of NHS Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB, said:

“Dedicated health and care staff will be working over Christmas and New Year to help everyone who really needs NHS services. Please play your part by being prepared for the winter months and reduce your risk of spending a miserable Christmas stuck at home or in hospital with a nasty virus. It’s not too late to get your vaccines – they’re free for the people most at risk and save countless lives every year.

“For the NHS, the first week of January is historically one of the busiest of the year, partly as a result of viruses and also because seriously ill people put off seeking help over the bank holidays. Getting help early helps you and others who need our services.”

“If you or a loved one are very unwell over Christmas or New Year, get medical advice straight away. Minor symptoms can turn into more serious issues, particularly if you are older or have a long-term health condition. Contact NHS 111 free for urgent help or if you’re unsure. Don’t forget the mental health support on offer via NHS 111 – choose option 2 when you get through.”

For more information on keeping well this winter visit the Hertfordshire and west Essex winter health and wellbeing information hub at

<https://www.hertsandwestessex.ics.nhs.uk/winter>