



UK National
Screening Committee



Screening Programme

Advice on Private Health Providers offering screening to NHS patients through GP practices

November 2014

Withdrawn May 2021





About the UK National Screening Committee

The UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC) oversees screening policy in all four nations, and works with the different implementation bodies to support delivery. In England, the UK NSC is the implementation body for all screening programmes, with the exception of cancer.

The UK NSC and NHS Screening Programmes are part of Public Health England (PHE), an executive agency of the Department of Health. PHE was established on 1 April 2013 to bring together public health specialists from more than 70 organisations into a single public health service.

UK National Screening Committee
Mint Wing, Centre Block G
South Wharf Road
London W2 1NY
Tel: +44 (0)20 33126927 Twitter:
[@PHE_Screening](https://twitter.com/PHE_Screening)
www.screening.nhs.uk
www.gov.uk/phe

© Crown Copyright 2014

You may re-use this information (excluding logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v2.0. To view this licence, visit OGL or email psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Published November 2014

Advice on Private Health Screening being offered through GP practices

The option of private screening is becoming increasingly popular as people seek assurance that they are not suffering from a serious health problem in the belief that the earlier a disease is detected, the more easily it is treated.

The issues:

- General practices across England are being approached by companies offering private health screens to their NHS patients.
- The NHS only provides screening programmes where the benefits of screening for the condition outweigh any potential harms (as recommended by the UK NSC)
- Private screening companies often offer screening for conditions not recommended by the UK NSC

GPs should ensure that they are aware of the benefits and risks of screening and be abreast of the national evidence about screening, especially if considering advising patients to accept private screening for conditions outside of UK NSC recommendations. They should ensure that screening offered to their patients is evidence based and is explained with sufficient information for the patients to make an informed choice.

- GPs should act within current guidelines of good medical practice when offering private screening to NHS patients and be aware of probity issues
- GPs should be familiar with NHS screening programmes and what conditions are screened for as recommended by the UK NSC

This information relates to private screening services directed at asymptomatic people, this differs from the standard health tests a GP may recommend to their patients. The UK NSC does not intend to recommend that GPs do not discuss private screening with their patients, but GPs should be aware of and able to inform their patients of the risks as well as the potential benefits. This guidance is designed to inform GPs about the issue of screening, in order to assist with advising patients about the availability of private screening services.

More information about screening, the work of the UK NSC and all of the conditions that the UK NSC has policies on can be found at www.screening.nhs.uk.

Accepted principles for healthcare screening:

Screening is a balancing act between the potential benefits it can give and the potential harms. This is the case for any healthcare intervention – but the difference with screening is that it is

healthy, asymptomatic people who are usually offered it. This differs from the usual health tests a GP may give their patient.

There are a number of accepted principles of screening that NHS professionals should adhere to:

- Only offer screening if there is proven evidence that, overall, the benefits of screening outweigh the potential harms. This means that:
 - screening should not be offered if there is evidence suggesting that screening is not beneficial
 - screening should not be offered in the absence of known evidence (i.e. either the research is not sufficient yet or it has not been properly assessed)
- Screening should only be offered if it can fulfil the relevant list of criteria for a worthwhile screening programme (this includes the test, the treatment and the care pathway) such as those accepted by the World Health Organisation. The UK NSC uses an expanded version (see www.screening.nhs.uk/criteria).
- If screening, outside of the UK NSC's recommendations, is being offered it is the responsibility of the person offering screening to ensure that the patient is sufficiently informed about both potential benefits and potential harms of the screening **NHS evidence-based advice on screening:**

The NHS has set up a robust system for evaluating potential screening tests and programmes. The UK NSC oversees screening policy in all four nations, and works with the different implementation bodies to support delivery. It is recognised in the NHS Constitution as the source of expert advice on screening and ensures that the science and evidence have been thoroughly assessed before a screening test or programme is recommended for use on NHS patients.

The UK NSC has a policy database listing conditions for which potential screening tests or programmes are regularly assessed: www.screening.nhs.uk/policies.

The potential pitfalls of screening:

No screening test is perfect

No screening test is completely sensitive or specific (ie there is an irreducible number of false positives and false negatives), so some people will be referred on for further investigations and diagnostic tests which they do not need. This can lead to significant anxiety for the patient, whilst diagnostic measures can be invasive and may have their own risks and side effects.

Or the opposite can occur: people can be reassured falsely, which means they might stop making an effort in keeping up their healthy habits and behaviours.

A screening test that produces excessive false positives can also impact on local primary and secondary health services, which may have to dedicate significant resource and time to

investigate and reassure patients who actually have nothing wrong with them. This is likely to have a knock-on effect on the availability and timeliness of other services (including general practice) for patients who are sick.

Importance of professional knowledge on private screening being offered

It is important that GPs and practice staff have appropriate knowledge and awareness about screening and the programmes that are available locally. It is part of the duty of care to their patients to give a balanced view of whether private screening will be beneficial. Patients should receive enough information to make a properly informed decision. It should not be left to patients to decide for themselves in the absence of impartial information. If GPs are offering private screening through a private provider then the likelihood is that patients will assume that GPs are endorsing this screening. This may mean individual patients are less likely to look into the pros and cons of being screened than if they sought private screening for themselves.

Good practice and probity

Offering private screening to NHS patients where the GP has invited the patient to attend raises important issues. GPs need to be careful that they are not contravening GMC Good Practice guidelines on offering private health care for which their patients have to pay and for which the practice has some financial gain (even if only administrative compensation). This is particularly true in those cases where the NHS offers a similar (or more advanced) screening service free of charge, such as for abdominal aortic aneurysms.

There are other issues to do with the finer points of probity and, for example, the use of NHS practice information so that private companies can gain from selling their products to these patients. The LMC and BMA should advise on this. Overall the most important issue is about patient safety and potential harm to patients from endorsing screening that has insufficient evidence to show benefit.

Further information:

The UK NSC has produced a public information leaflet to provide information on private health screening. You can view and print this from: www.screening.nhs.uk/privatescreening

Information on the types of private health screening that may be offered and what NHS screening is available can be found here: www.screening.nhs.uk/privatescreening