

Let's Talk...Health Checks and Screening engagement summary

As part of our *Let's Talk* project we looked into the topic of 'Regular Health Checks and Screening' to understand the impact of changes that have taken place in these services due to COVID-19.

Before COVID-19 GP Practices carried out regular checks such as diabetes reviews, blood pressure checks, annual health checks for carers, those with long term conditions and/or learning disabilities and health checks every five years for those aged between 40-74 years who do not have pre-existing conditions. The NHS also has a rolling screening program that was implemented at various stages of the patient's life. These checks and screenings were suspended during the pandemic in order to limit the spread of COVID-19 and to mitigate the extra workload being experienced by health services. Many of these checks and screenings have been reinstated but there is now a large backlog and some of the checks are now carried out remotely.

The importance of regular health checks is stated on the NHS website¹:

'The health conditions picked up by the NHS Health Check are, when added together, the biggest cause of preventable deaths in the UK, with around 7 million people affected by them'.

and screening is a way of finding out if people have a higher chance of developing a health problem. The benefits of screening are²:

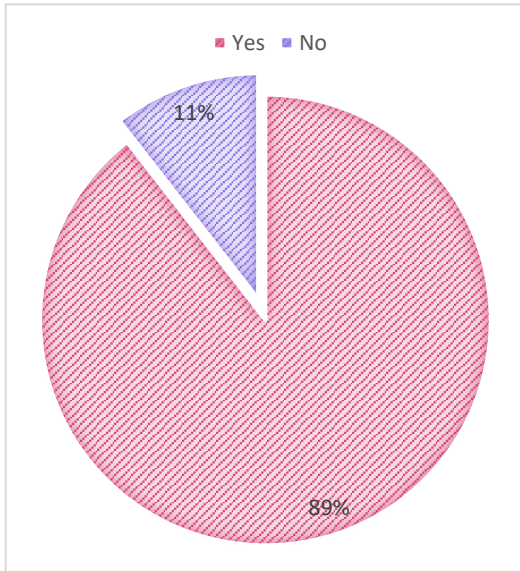
- They can detect a problem early, before you have any symptoms
- Early detection of problems can mean that treatment is more effective
- They can help people make better informed decisions about their health
- It can reduce the chance of developing a condition or its complications
- Some deaths can be prevented

This article shares some of the feedback received from Rutland people about the suspension of regular health checks and screening. We spoke to three people about their experiences and had 16 responses to our online quick poll.

¹ See <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-health-check/what-is-an-nhs-health-check-new/>

² See <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-screening/>

1. Did you attend regular health and screening procedures before COVID-19?



17 out of the 19 respondents had attended regular checks and screening before COVID-19 for reasons such as: a regular health check (for those aged between 40-74 years); Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease checks; blood pressure monitoring; annual learning disability health check; breast screening; diabetic review; prostate screening; medication reviews; cervical smear; asthma reviews; vitamin B12 levels check and heart checks. Despite a small number of responses, this wide range of checks mentioned highlights the breadth of these services.

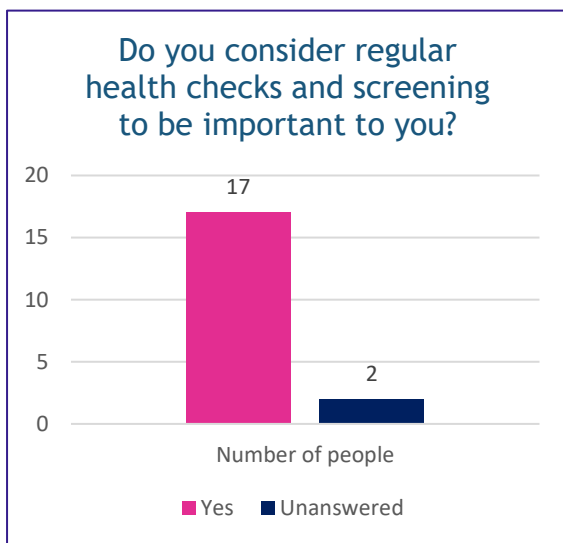
Patients have become accustomed to regular checks with their GP practice and the reduced contact may lead to people feel that the care provided by their GP practice has diminished.

“My husband used to have a regular health ‘MOT,’ but he hasn’t had one for years. Our neighbour is meant to have regular cortisone injections, but the Doctor keeps putting them off. People are slipping through the cracks.”

“I used to get a regular health ‘MOT’ and that is one of the things that is not as good as it was. It used to be a personal appointment with a nurse and blood tests and then a couple of weeks after that you had an appointment with a nurse and talked about your medication, whether you need to keep taking it or whether there had been any changes in your condition. Now they send us a text message saying, ‘send us your blood readings’ and you don’t get a face-to-face consultation because they don’t want that many people in the surgery.”

2. Do you consider regular health checks and screening to be important and helpful?

Two people didn't respond to this question but everyone else said how important regular health checks and screening are for early diagnosis or progression of illnesses.



“I think they are important and helpful and it’s important to know how things are progressing - one way or the other. It’s important to know what’s happening, whether the condition is stabilising or needs further investigation or treatment. I don’t think there are any disadvantages.”

“Yes, the services are very important for early diagnosis and easier treatment. They are also important for alerting to any deterioration in a condition and for appropriate prescribing of medication.”

“There are no smears or routine health checks or ‘MOT’s’ happening at the moment, but these need to happen so that people don’t suffer in the future.”

Although it isn't necessarily a health check or screening, the testing of a patients B12 levels and the giving of injections show how effective patients find these routine tests and treatments:

“I used to have regular vitamin B12 injections. These stopped during COVID-19. They have restarted but they have reduced them from every month to every three months. I’ve been getting tingling and numbness and sores again, which are signs of vitamin B deficiency. Everything has been much better with the injections. I rang to speak to the surgery but couldn’t get through so gave up as I didn’t have the emotional strength. It is such a good preventative for many people.”

Have COVID-19 imposed delays in receiving age-related, or condition-related health checks or screening affected your health and wellbeing?



Although 7 people said they were not affected by the delays, 12 respondents had experienced some decline in their wellbeing.

“I am just concerned that these things are no longer being monitored. I think not having the checks has had an impact on our mental health.”

“The delays affected me because of not knowing what is happening. As far as I know, what I’ve got is not serious, but I need to know whether or not it is deteriorating. It’s more worrying not knowing. Things could be getting worse, and nothing being done about it. It was tests that showed up the problems in the first place. I can’t detect any difference but would be quite or very poorly if they got worse without treatment.”

“The imposed delays have caused a degree of anxiety. It was always reassuring to have a professional check over your results etc. and say that all is well. This was made worse by the fact that if I had any problems, I knew I could not easily get through to the surgery and would have difficulty in getting an appointment.”

Some people accepted the suspension of checks and screenings during the worst of the pandemic:

“It hasn’t actually affected me because I’ve not really thought about it with everything else that’s being going on - that is, trying to get appointments and attend them for known problems.”

4. Now that NHS cancer screening programmes and GP health checks have restarted, how do you feel about attending them?

12 people felt confident in attending their surgery for reinstated health checks and screening:

“It’s important these checks are done, and I assume GP practices will have the right measures in place for infection control. So, I’m comfortable going.”



Others appreciated the introduction of increased self-management and remote appointments:

“Online checks are fine. I’ve been asked to check my blood pressure at home and send in digitally and I’ve had SMS messages back from the surgery saying all is ok. I feel well looked after by my GP and Uppingham Surgery.”

For some conditions it may be possible to monitor them from home but other conditions may need to be assessed face to face by a medical professional such as breathing checks, blood tests etc:

“I am aware of a friend that has COPD breathing checks over the phone, how can you check that over the phone?”

The reasons for suspending checks and screenings have been understood as a means of decreasing the spread of COVID-19 and limiting the strain on the healthcare system. However, the positive feedback about health checks and screening are well evidenced in this paper and are also documented by the NHS. In turn, the early detection of deteriorating condition or the early diagnosis of a serious condition can, in the long-term place less demand on NHS resources.

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