

14 DECEMBER 2022

NHS Briefing: Industrial Action Winter 2022

Potential NHS strikes

A number of NHS trade unions in England have voted to take industrial action, with strikes currently scheduled for late December and early January. The proposed nursing strike days of 15 and 20 December are expected to affect 44 trusts. Nine ambulance trusts are expected to be affected on the proposed ambulance strike days of 21 December and eight ambulance trusts are expected to be affected on 28 December. There are further ballots of other groups of NHS workers, with midwives announcing they have not reached the required threshold. Physiotherapists have announced their members support industrial action but have not yet announced what action they will take following this result.

What the NHS is doing

The role of the NHS during any industrial action is to ensure that patients are kept as safe as possible and that services are maintained as effectively as possible.

Supporting trust planning

NHS England creates a national planning framework and has set out a checklist of preparations for trusts in advance of strikes, offering additional support where needed.

Detailed preparations are made at a local, individual trust level with NHS England regional teams supporting trusts in their planning and identifying where mutual aid between trusts can be provided.

Agreeing strike derogations to protect services and patient safety

NHS England has also held discussions nationally with unions on what services will continue – services that are ‘derogated’ from industrial action – across the country. As a result of these talks, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) has agreed that chemotherapy, dialysis, critical care units (such as intensive care and high dependency), neonatal, paediatric intensive care and paediatric A&Es will be exempt from strike action.

NHS preparations for industrial action:



NHS organisations with capacity will aid those who require extra help.



NHS organisations are in regular and open discussions with trade unions to secure derogations so lifesaving services can continue.



With the government, the NHS will work with the armed forces to ensure ambulance services are supported.



The NHS is in discussions with the independent sector, voluntary sector and social care on how they provide extra support.



NHS England has issued affected organisations with a self-assessment checklist to support their preparations. NHS England is assessing affected organisations and offering planning support where needed.

These conversations are continuing nationally with the RCN and the unions representing ambulance staff. Talks are also happening locally between NHS trusts and strike committees to agree what needs to happen to keep patients safe. Until discussions with the unions have concluded and we know actual staffing levels on the days in question, it is impossible to predict the full extent of the impact of any strike action. This will inevitably vary from place to place.

Managing risk

Trusts, supported by NHS England, will do all they can to manage the disruption of any industrial action. Trusts will concentrate on ensuring the safe provision of urgent and emergency care, particularly for life threatening illnesses, triaging as needed on the basis of clinical priority. Trust leaders will do all they can to preserve planned care, but strike action will inevitably mean some disruption.

Each ambulance trust will draw up a detailed plan for each strike day. Mitigations for the ambulance strike days being considered include:

- using the military to transfer patients with less urgent conditions to and from hospital
- using St John Ambulance and Community First responders
- using taxis to transport less critically ill to and from hospital where clinically appropriate
- ensuring strong clinical triage in call centres
- optimising discharges from hospitals to create capacity.

Messages for the public

Nobody should put off seeking emergency care. Key life-saving services are set to continue.

Patients whose conditions are not life-threatening are likely to experience delays in accessing urgent care in affected trusts and during ambulance strikes.

Patients should attend as normal during strike days. Some planned care appointments may be rescheduled. Hospitals will contact patients directly if their appointments need to be rescheduled due to industrial action.

As always, anyone who needs less urgent care can also use NHS 111 online for advice.

Primary care is not affected by the current planned strikes, so people should continue to attend their GP or dental appointments.

KEY QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is happening?

Trade unions representing NHS staff are in dispute with the government over the 2022/23 pay award. A number of the unions have balloted their NHS members to take part in industrial action. As a result, members of the RCN are striking on 15 and 20 December; members of the GMB, Unite and Unison (ambulance staff) are striking on 21 December and members of GMB (ambulance staff) are striking on 28 December. The NHS wants to see a resolution as soon as possible but pay is a matter for the government and the trade unions.

Are lives at risk?

Patient safety is our utmost concern. The NHS is seeking derogations with unions to ensure emergency services operate as usual.

What if I need urgent or emergency care?

Anyone who needs urgent care should use NHS111 online or call NHS 111 to be assessed and directed to the right care for them. When someone is seriously ill or injured and their life is at risk, you should seek emergency care in the normal way, by calling 999 or attending A&E.

What do strikes mean for NHS services in my area?

Not every hospital and ambulance service will be affected by strike action. You can check which trusts are affected on each trade union's website:

- [Royal College of Nursing](#) (15 and 20 December)
- [UNISON](#) (21 December)
- [GMB](#) (21 and 28 December)
- [Unite](#) (21 December)

What if I have an appointment on a strike day?

Everyone who has an appointment should attend as planned unless your local NHS provider has contacted you to reschedule. If we have not contacted you, please attend your appointment even if your trust is affected by strikes.

KEY QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Will emergency care be affected on strike days?

Emergency care will continue to be available across all parts of the country. It is really important that in emergency and life-threatening cases - when someone is seriously ill, or their life is at risk - patients continue to attend as normal.

Will GP services be affected on strike days?

GP services will be running as normal on strike days and patients should continue to attend.

When will I find out if my appointment is rescheduled?

The NHS will contact you if your appointment needs to be rescheduled due to strike action. This is likely to be a text, phone call or a letter and you should be offered an alternative date for your appointment. If we have not contacted you, please attend your appointment.

What is considered an emergency?

Patients should only call 999 if seriously ill or injured, or there is risk to life. Ambulances will be dispatched where clinically appropriate, with patients prioritised on the basis of clinical need.

How long will services be impacted?

The nurses strike on 15 and 20 December will last for 12 hours and the ambulance strikes on 21 and 28 December will last for 24 hours. However, patients should be aware that it may take longer for services to return to normal.

Is the independent sector being used to stop appointments being rescheduled?

Yes, the NHS is seeking to use private sector capacity wherever possible.

If my appointment is rescheduled, will I be put back to the bottom of the waiting list?

Any appointments that need to be rescheduled will be done so as a priority.

I have a loved one who will be a hospital inpatient on strike day – how will their care be affected?

All hospital inpatients will be informed of how their care will be impacted on a ward-by-ward basis by the staff involved in delivering their care.