

Unravelling the mysteries of the NHS Prescription Process!



1. Introduction

Hello, I'm Jack Gritt, I happen to be the Chair of the Patient Participation Group (PPG), but primarily I am simply a patient at the Cam and Uley Family Practice. I'm relatively smart, and yet the prescription system leaves me flummoxed with regularity! How prescriptions are prepared, sent electronically, when they arrive at the pharmacy, how long the process takes and terminology like tokens, pathfinders, repeat prescriptions, barcodes and a myriad of other mysteries leave me foxed. I just want to collect my prescription!

I understand that prescriptions can sometimes feel confusing and frustrating, particularly when a medication has been prescribed but is not immediately available at the pharmacy.

So I decided to try and understand the system from the “inside” and then put a brief guide together that might help you all to unravel the mysteries of prescribing too. This guide explains how the prescription process works, what the different types of prescriptions mean, and how you can help ensure you receive your medication when you need it. Note: I am going to use the term GP throughout this guide as it is a term we are all familiar with, however for this document I use GP to mean any clinician who is authorised to generate and **sign** a prescription.

And what is so important to remember is that the GP's, practice staff, pharmacists, pharmacy staff and the patients are all lovely people doing their absolute best. But we also know that situations arise where frustrations bubble over, people on all sides can get a little agitated and it seems like the system is failing.

I hope this information gives you the assurance that the process works well, but you have to **understand** it to avoid being in that frustrated position where things appear to have gone awry.

So here we go!

2. The Electronic Process – Understanding How Prescriptions Work

Our prescriptions are now issued electronically. This means the GP prepares the prescription and sends it electronically through the NHS system to your nominated pharmacy.

The key thing to understand here is that this process is not instantaneous, prescriptions do **not** arrive at the pharmacy instantly.

2.1. The prescription goes through the following process:

- 2.1.1. A prescription is generated. Note this may be a GP or it may be another practitioner who can generate prescriptions but cannot sign them.
- 2.1.2. The prescription is then signed by a GP. Note this may be immediate as it depends on how the prescription was generated, if it is a repeat prescription request, it may go into a batch for signing at the end of a surgery period.
- 2.1.3. It is then uploaded to the NHS Electronic Prescription Service (EPS), often referred to as the NHS "Spine". This process means there is a time delay between a prescription being signed and it arriving with the Pharmacy.
- 2.1.4. Next, the prescription is downloaded by your nominated pharmacy. There can be a the lag whilst the prescription becomes available in The Spine, but the Pharmacy will perform regular refreshes of its computer system in order to access the prescription.
- 2.1.5. The pharmacy must then process and dispense the medication before it can be collected. Our local pharmacies (in line with national guidelines) ask patients to allow up to 3 working days for routine dispensing (noting that for urgent medication arrangements can be made to access it sooner).

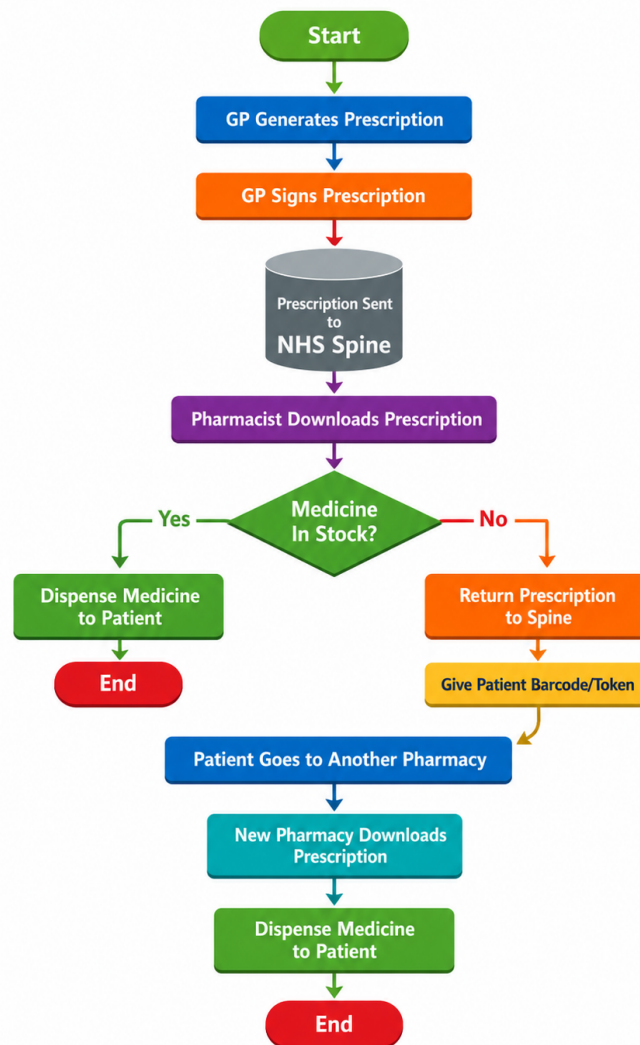
2.2. **Can I go straight from my GP appointment and collect my prescription?**

You can see from the process described above; this is generally not possible (but please see the section on urgent needs for medication). There are many steps that have to be completed before your medicine will be ready. For new medications following a consultation it can take up to two hours for an electronic prescription to appear in the pharmacy's system, although it may arrive sooner. The Pharmacy will then need time to prepare and dispense the medication. For routine prescriptions, patients should allow up to 3 working days for dispensing.

For repeat/pathfinder medications this will be much longer as 3 days' notice is required to prescribe and a further 3-4 days to dispense (7 days total).

So if you go straight to the pharmacy after your appointment expecting to collect your prescription you are most likely to be disappointed and this is when frustration sets in.

2.3. The process for the electronic NHS system can be seen in the diagram below.



Note: The right hand side of this diagram shows what happens if your medicine is not in stock and you choose to go to an alternative Pharmacy. You can, of course, leave the prescription in The Spine and wait for your usual Pharmacy to order it.

3. Terminology and what it all means!

3.1. What Is a Pathfinder Prescription?

Some patients receive their medication through a system known as a Pathfinder

prescription.

A Pathfinder allows a GP to authorise a series of repeat prescriptions (a batch) in advance and sent them to your chosen pharmacy.

The batches are typically for 6 or 12 months (but noting this will be reduced to 2-3 months if overdue monitoring is needed, e.g. bloods etc). The prescriptions are issued electronically in advance and made available to the pharmacy over the course of the Pathfinder. You will not need to order your medication every month; you can go straight to the pharmacy and collect it for the duration of the Pathfinder. When the pharmacy dispenses the last prescription in a batch, they will tell you it's the last one and that you need to see your GP to request a new Pathfinder. To request a new Pathfinder, use the NHS App or SystmConnect and include details of the medication requiring renewal.

You should note that:

- Not all medications are suitable for prescribing on a Pathfinder (for example, controlled drugs, inhalers and anything that is taken "When needed").
- Medication reviews may still be required before a new Pathfinder can be issued.
- Pharmacies will dispense Pathfinder prescriptions at regular intervals of 28 or 56 days since the last collection date. If a patient requires a Pathfinder prescription early e.g. for holiday, then it is the patient's responsibility to let the pharmacy know 7 days before they require their medication.

3.2. What Is a Repeat Prescription?

A repeat prescription is medication that has been authorised by your GP for ongoing use. They sit in the GP system and allow individual repeats for a certain number of issues. Your GP may authorise a number of future repeat issues. However, unlike a Pathfinder prescription, you must still request each issue when it is due. Once you have used all the repeats listed on your file, practice staff have to consult with the GP to ask for more repeats to be added to your records. This may not be instant. For many medicines a review is required before more medicine can be added on a repeat basis.

You can request repeat medication using:

- ✓ The NHS App
- ✓ SystmConnect

- ✓ Drop a re-order slip into our prescription box at Cam or the reception at Uley
- ✓ Pharmacy ordering apps (e.g. Prescription Plus via the Boots App)

When a repeat prescription request is received, Practice staff check:

Whether the medication is due

Whether a medication review is required

Whether the medication remains appropriate

Prescriptions must then be authorised and electronically signed by a GP before being issued.

3.3. What Is a Medication Review?

Many medications require periodic review to ensure they remain safe and appropriate.

If a review is due, the Practice may need to arrange this before further prescriptions can be issued.

This is an important part of safe prescribing and may occasionally delay a prescription request.

3.4. What Is a Barcode?

The NHS App can sometimes provide a prescription barcode.

This barcode does not speed up the prescription process. Instead, it acts as an electronic reference for your prescription.

The barcode can be useful if:

You wish to collect medication from a different pharmacy.

A pharmacy is having difficulty locating your prescription.

You need evidence that a prescription has been issued.

Think of it as the electronic equivalent of holding a paper prescription in your hand. However, having a barcode does not necessarily mean your medication is ready to collect. The barcode is simply a reference number for your electronic prescription. If a pharmacy says they cannot see your prescription on their system, showing them the barcode can often help them locate it.

3.5. What Is a Prescription Token?

A prescription token is a printed version of an electronic prescription. It is not a prescription itself but provides evidence that an electronic prescription exists.

Some patients request a token after a consultation, particularly when medication has been prescribed urgently.

4. How Long Should I Allow?

4.1. Definitions

Let's start by defining what some of the terms mean:

Pathfinder prescription: Ongoing medication already authorised in advance.

Repeat prescription: Ongoing medication requiring a request each time.

Acute prescription: New or short-term medication issued following a consultation.

Urgent prescription: Any prescription (acute, pathfinder or repeat) that requires accelerated handling because of clinical need.

4.2. Pathfinders and Repeat Prescriptions

Please allow:

At least 3 working days for the Practice to process and issue your prescription.

A further 3–4 working days for the pharmacy to prepare and dispense the medication.

To avoid running out of medication, we recommend requesting repeat prescriptions **at least 7-10 days before they are needed**.

4.3. Acute (One-Off) Prescriptions

Acute prescriptions are medications issued following a consultation for a new or short-term condition.

These are generally processed more quickly than routine repeat prescriptions, but patients should still allow time for the prescription to travel through the NHS system and for the pharmacy to dispense it. It can take up to two hours for an electronic prescription to become available to the pharmacy through the NHS Spine, although it may arrive sooner. You should then allow 3 days for the

pharmacy to prepare and dispense the medication. Urgent prescriptions may be prioritised where appropriate, but patients should not assume medication will be ready immediately after a consultation.

4.4. Urgent Prescriptions

If you believe medication is required urgently, please let us know as soon as possible.

The Practice can assess the urgency of your request and decide the most appropriate course of action.

Please remember:

Urgent requests are prioritised wherever possible.

Urgent processing by the Practice does not remove the time needed for the prescription to travel through NHS systems and be dispensed by the pharmacy.

Some urgent medication requests may require direct review by a clinician before they can be authorised.

4.5. What If My Pharmacy Does Not Have My Medication in Stock?

Occasionally, a pharmacy may not have your medication available

If this happens, you have several options:

Ask the pharmacy whether they can obtain stock quickly.

Ask whether another strength or formulation is available. You will then need to discuss this with the Practice as the GP will need to issue a new prescription for a different strength/formulation.

You do not necessarily need a new prescription to use a different pharmacy if the prescription has **not already been dispensed**. You can ask for the electronic prescription to be released back into the NHS Spine so that another pharmacy can download and dispense it. But please note, if **any items** on the prescription have already been dispensed by the pharmacy, they cannot send the remaining items back into the NHS Spine, a new prescription will need to be obtained from the GP.

5. How You Can Help

You can help us and your pharmacy by:

- Ordering repeat medication at least 7 days before it is needed.
- Checking whether you are approaching the end of a Pathfinder cycle.
- Attending medication reviews when invited.
- Allowing time for prescriptions to travel through NHS systems.
- Avoiding unnecessary calls to the Practice or pharmacy immediately after a prescription has been issued.

Many apparent prescription problems are not problems at all, but simply the result of the various stages of the prescribing and dispensing process taking place behind the scenes. The prescription process involves a number of separate stages that are not always visible or understood by those involved.

By ordering medication in good time and understanding how the system works, you can help the practice, the pharmacy and fellow patients ensure medicines are supplied safely and efficiently. Allowing sufficient time for the process to work helps everyone receive the best possible service.

I truly hope this guide has been useful and helped you understand how the prescription system works. I have certainly learnt a great deal whilst preparing it and find the process far less frustrating now that I understand what is happening behind the scenes and the differences in the types of prescriptions. My hope is that it helps you manage your prescriptions more effectively too. If you've got this far, thank you for reading!

With my thanks to Lisa (Cam and Uley Family Practice) and Nia (Boots) for their help in pulling this information together. Hopefully we can all have a greatly enhanced prescription experience!

Best Wishes

Jack Gritt

Patient and PPG Chair