

PRINTABLE GUIDE

Understand online symptom checkers

Symptom checkers have different purposes and evidence behind them. A general chatbot, commercial health app and NHS triage service are not interchangeable. This guide explains how to choose a healthcare route; it does not diagnose symptoms or rate particular medical apps.

Phone or computer | 2 min read | 5 steps

Before you start

- ☐ Use the healthcare services appropriate to your country.
- ☐ Do not wait for an online answer in a medical emergency.

1. Check who operates the service

Look for the provider's name, intended users and stated purpose. Avoid treating an app-store rating or the words 'AI powered' as evidence of medical accuracy.

- ☐ Done this step

2. Separate diagnosis from triage

NHS 111 online in England asks questions to advise what help to seek and when. It does not give a diagnosis. Its stated service is for people aged five and over.

- ☐ Done this step

3. Use the appropriate urgent route

In the UK, call 999 for a life-threatening emergency. For urgent help when it is not an emergency, follow the appropriate local NHS route; England offers 111 online or telephone 111.

- ☐ Done this step

4. Answer carefully and read the result

If using an official triage service, answer its questions accurately and follow its stated next steps. Do not change answers simply to obtain a more reassuring result.

☐ Done this step

5. Ask a professional when needed

Contact a healthcare professional when directed, when information is unclear or when you remain concerned. Do not start, stop or change treatment on the strength of a general chatbot response.

☐ Done this step

Try it for yourself

Bookmark your local official healthcare service before you need it.

☐ I tried the task.

My notes

Can a checker tell me for certain that nothing is wrong?

No. An online result depends on its purpose, limitations and your answers. Follow official advice and seek appropriate care rather than using it as certainty.

Official help and the online guide

NHS 111 online purpose and limits -

<https://digital.nhs.uk/services/nhs-111-online/nhs-111-online-is-a-class-1-medical-device>

NHS urgent help routes -

<https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/urgent-and-emergency-care-services/when-to-use-111/>

Read online: <https://plaintech-guides.pages.dev/guides/understand-online-symptom-checkers/>