

Looking out for dad

Building a 'father pathway' in the Men's Health Strategy

Today's fathers are more 'hands-on' than ever before, and we need them to be in good health. But the NHS overlooks them, missing a golden opportunity to engage with men at a point when they are most available and open to improving their health behaviours.

NHS services should be recognising men's vital role as parents, not just as maternal supporters – but there is currently no publicly required engagement with expectant or new fathers, to check their physical or mental health, support them as hands-on caregivers, or even add them to their baby's health record.

Why is change needed?

Almost all (90%+) of expectant fathers accompany their partner to antenatal appointments, scans and labour, and jointly register their baby's birth. But they're nobody's 'patient', so it's left to chance whether anyone asks how they are, explains how their health impacts on others', or helps them learn about baby-care. Too often, they're dealt with as an unwelcome visitor.

We should care about men's journeys into fatherhood, because:

- Fathers' physical and mental health impact on their children's and partners' outcomes, through pregnancy and beyond
- Men need high quality information to help them prepare for and adjust to their fathering roles
- Some dads will need additional support, signposting or referrals

A [recent survey](#) by Men's Health magazine, found that 56% of dads reported feeling overwhelmed in the first year of fatherhood, 37% felt isolated from their family and friends and 22% experienced depression. More widely, evidence suggests that as many as 10% of new fathers in the UK experience poor mental health during the perinatal period.

What a 'father pathway' should include:

A 'new dad NHS health check' for all fathers

This should cover key issues that can impact their own ability to be a great dad, as well as the health of their child and its mother. Hosting the health check within GP services would allow any problems or concerns to be noted on the father's health record, and appropriate follow-up or referrals to be organised.

Nationally mandated commissioning of father-inclusive services and training for NHS professionals

Commissioners should be required to specify delivery of a pathway for expectant and new fathers – and key staff (midwives, health visitors, GPs and mental health practitioners) should be trained to engage with and provide information and support to fathers.

Government-led pilots to improve the collection and sharing of 'dad data'

Routinely collecting data about fathers, opening their health records and linking them with their children's health records, would transform services' engagement with dads: but it's not happening.

The Fatherhood Institute is coordinating an [open letter](#) to Wes Streeting, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, to include expecting and new fathers in the Government's forthcoming Men's Health Strategy. This is supported by a coalition representing 250+ voluntary sector organisations in the child and family sectors, and is part of the Institute's [Looking out for dad](#) campaign.

About the 'new dad' health check

The health check would be offered to all new fathers. It could be carried out by a midwife, health visitor, GP, practice nurse or other health professional, and explore key conditions and behaviours known to impact on men's own health and that of their loved ones, such as:

- Obesity, overweight and exercise
- Mental health (especially stress, anxiety and depression)
- Smoking
- Alcohol and substance use

- Fathers' roles in supporting baby safety (including safe sleeping and shaken baby syndrome)

Fathers' health matters to their children, partners, wider family, friends and colleagues – as well as to men themselves. We should be helping dads look after themselves, make better health decisions, and seek help if they're struggling. This could also save the NHS money by shifting the emphasis from late intervention to early prevention.

Background sources

Fatherhood Institute evidence reviews: [Who's the bloke in the room?](#) (antenatal) and [Bringing baby home](#) (postnatal)
Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report [The myth of invisible men](#)