HEALTH BASICS

Health A-Z reference

An alphabetical health reference helps you find information about conditions, tests, treatments, and health services.

WHAT IT IS
An alphabetical index of health topics

WHERE IT COMES UP
Health websites, patient portals, libraries, and clinic information pages

WHY IT MATTERS
Helps you find and understand relevant health information

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a diagnosis or substitute for individual medical advice

WHO TO ASK
Pharmacist, primary care clinician, or health information service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No test; assess the source, review date, and references

Overview

A Health A-Z reference is an alphabetical collection of health information. It may include entries about medical conditions, symptoms, tests, medicines, treatments, procedures, and health services.

It is not a disease or a diagnosis. It is a way of organising information so that you can find a topic by name.

There is no single, universal Health A-Z. Hospitals, government health services, charities, and commercial websites may each publish their own version. The topics included, the wording used, and the advice given can differ between references.

A good Health A-Z entry should explain medical terms in plain language. It should also say when self-care may be reasonable, when routine medical advice may help, and when urgent assessment is needed.

These references can help you prepare for a healthcare appointment or understand information you have already received. They cannot account for your complete medical history, examination findings, medicines, allergies, pregnancy status, or test results.

How it works

Most Health A-Z references let you browse by the first letter of a topic. For example, asthma may appear under A and migraine under M. Many also provide a search box.

The same health issue may have several names. A reference may use cross-links to connect an everyday term with a medical term. For example, "high blood pressure" may link to "hypertension," which is the medical name for the same finding.

An entry may describe:

Some entries are about symptoms, such as dizziness or chest pain. A symptom is something a person feels or notices. Other entries describe diagnoses, such as asthma, or procedures, such as an MRI scan.

The information may be written for a particular country or health system. Medicine names, available services, referral routes, screening programmes, and emergency numbers may not apply elsewhere.

A publication date or review date shows when the page was last assessed. It does not guarantee that every statement is current, but it helps you judge whether newer guidance may exist.

- What the topic means
- Common reasons it comes up
- Tests or measurements that may be used
- Available forms of treatment or support
- Questions you could ask a clinician
- Signs that need urgent or emergency care

Why it matters for your health

A Health A-Z reference can help you understand unfamiliar words in a clinic letter, test report, medicine leaflet, or hospital discharge summary. This can make it easier to take part in decisions about your care.

It can also help you prepare useful questions. If a report mentions anaemia, for example, you might use a reference to learn that anaemia means having too little haemoglobin or too few healthy red blood cells. You could then ask what type is suspected, whether more tests are needed, and when results will be reviewed.

The exact page you choose matters. Reliable health information should identify the organisation responsible for it and explain where the medical content came from. It should separate evidence-based information from advertising or personal opinion.

A reference is most useful when it supports, rather than replaces, individual care. A clinician can consider factors that a general article cannot, including your age, symptoms, examination, existing conditions, medicines, and personal priorities.

What can go wrong

An alphabetical reference can make health topics appear simpler and more separate than they are. In practice, symptoms and conditions often overlap.

For example, chest pain can be related to muscle strain, acid reflux, heart attack, inflammation around the lungs, or a blood clot in the lung called a pulmonary embolism. A page about one possible cause cannot show which explanation applies to you.

Searching by a symptom can also lead to self-diagnosis. Headache may occur with migraine, a viral infection, medicine overuse, dehydration, or many other situations. Reading a list of possible causes does not establish which one is present.

Different topics may have similar names. Type 1 diabetes and type 2 diabetes both affect blood glucose, but they have important differences. Inflammatory bowel disease is not the same as irritable bowel syndrome. Selecting the wrong entry can produce confusing or unsuitable information.

Other problems include:

A Health A-Z page should not delay emergency care. Call your local emergency number if someone is unconscious, has severe difficulty breathing, has signs of a stroke, or has severe or persistent chest pressure. Stroke signs may include sudden facial drooping, arm weakness, or difficulty speaking.

Urgent advice is different from routine follow-up. New symptoms that are worsening, significant medication reactions, or advice from a test report to seek prompt care may require a same-day clinical service. Stable questions about terminology, planned tests, or long-term monitoring can usually be discussed at a routine appointment.

- Outdated pages that do not reflect current practice
- Advice written for another country or healthcare system
- Missing information about pregnancy, children, or long-term conditions

- Treatment descriptions that do not account for interactions or allergies
- Commercial content presented as independent health information

What you can do

Start with the exact word or phrase you were given. Copying the term from a report or letter can reduce the chance of opening a similarly named topic.

Check who publishes the reference. Government health services, national medical libraries, professional organisations, and established hospitals usually describe their editorial process. Look for a review date, named references, and a clear distinction between information and advertising.

When reading an entry, note what type of information it contains. A description of common features is not a checklist that confirms a diagnosis. A list of possible treatments is not a recommendation that one is suitable for you.

You can keep a short record containing:

If the topic concerns a medicine, check the official patient information leaflet supplied with it. A pharmacist can explain how the general information relates to your prescription. Do not change a prescribed dose or stop a medicine solely because of an A-Z entry.

If the topic comes from a test result, ask which result matters, what the laboratory's reference range means, and whether follow-up is planned. A reference range is the set of values a laboratory uses for comparison. Results outside that range do not always mean that a disease is present.

There is no medical test that checks whether a Health A-Z reference is "right" for you. The practical checks are the source, review date, supporting references, intended country, and fit with the advice given by your healthcare service.

- The exact medical term you searched
- The page title and publishing organisation
- The page's review date
- Questions raised by what you read
- Relevant symptoms, medicines, or test results to discuss

Common questions

Is every Health A-Z reference the same?

No. Each publisher chooses its topics and editorial standards. One reference may focus on conditions, while another includes medicines, tests, procedures, and local services.

Can it tell me what condition I have?

No. It may explain possible reasons for a symptom or define a diagnosis already mentioned by a clinician. It cannot diagnose you from a search term.

What if I cannot find the term?

Check the spelling and look for an alternative name. A pharmacist, primary care clinician, or health information service may be able to identify the term. If it appears in a letter or result, the service that issued the document can explain what it means in that context.

Should I use a symptom checker instead?

A symptom checker asks structured questions and may suggest a level of care. A Health A-Z reference mainly provides topic information. Neither replaces emergency care or an individual medical assessment.

How recent should the information be?

There is no single acceptable age for every page. Basic anatomy may change little, while medicine safety advice and screening programmes can change sooner. Check the review date and compare time-sensitive advice with current information from your local health service.

What should I ask at an appointment?

Useful questions include: "What does this term mean in my case?", "Are any tests needed?", "What changes should I watch for?", and "When should I seek urgent help?" You can also ask when and how follow-up will happen.

Sources

- NHS: Health A to Z - National Health Service collection of conditions, symptoms, tests, and treatments
- MedlinePlus: Health Topics - US National Library of Medicine alphabetical health topic index
- healthdirect: Health topics A-Z - Australian government-supported health information collection
- MedlinePlus: Evaluating Health Information - Guidance on checking the source, purpose, evidence, and currency of health information

- NHS: Symptoms of a stroke - Emergency warning signs and guidance on seeking immediate help