



Primary Health Care Frequently Asked Questions

What is primary health care?

Primary health care is generally the first contact a person has with Australia's health system. It relates to the treatment of patients who are not admitted to hospital.

Many people associate primary health care with their local general practitioner (GP). While general practice is the cornerstone of primary care in Australia, primary care can also include care provided through nurses (such as general practice nurses, community nurses and nurse practitioners), allied health professionals, midwives, pharmacists, dentists, and Aboriginal health workers.

Primary health care can be provided in the home or in community-based settings such as general practices, other private medical practices, community health centres, local government, and non-government service settings, such as Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services. It is not provided in hospitals—this type of care is known as acute care.

Why is primary health care important in our health system?

A strong, accessible primary health care system keeps people well and out of hospital by supporting them to manage their health issues in the community and at home.

Primary health care services can improve people's health and wellbeing by supporting them to manage their complex and chronic conditions and, by doing so, reduce the need for specialist services and visits to emergency departments. This is a key priority for Primary Health Networks (PHNs).

Providing health care close to home is most effective. Chronic conditions —such as mental illness, arthritis, diabetes, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cardiovascular disease—are becoming increasingly common in the Australian population and account for a significant proportion of potentially preventable hospitalisations. Given this, as well as an ageing population, the role of primary health care in keeping people well and in their communities is important.

What types of services are included in primary health care?

The types of services delivered under primary health care are broad ranging and include general practice services, prevention and health screening, early intervention, treatment and management.

Services may be targeted to specific population groups such as older people, mothers and children, young people, people living in rural and remote areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, refugees, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse, and low socio-economic backgrounds.

Primary health care services may also target specific conditions and health care needs, like sexual health, drug and alcohol treatment, oral health, cardiovascular disease, asthma, diabetes, mental health, and obesity.

Why is taking a regionally-based approach to primary health care important?

Primary health care works best when it is adapted to suit the specific needs of the local community.

PHNs provide the infrastructure to support, adjust and reform the primary health care system within their regions. They are located across Australia, and were specifically created to identify and address the gaps in primary health care. PHNs work collaboratively with other regional health stakeholders to plan, design and commission evidence-based health services that support the specific needs of local communities and better integrate the health system at the local level.

PHNs make decisions independent of government and are operated by not-for-profit companies. They decide which services or health care interventions should be provided and who should provide them. They also work closely with providers to monitor performance and implement change.

Primary health care services may look and operate differently, depending on location. Services designed for metropolitan areas may need to be adapted to work effectively in regional, rural or remote communities. There may also be significant variations in the way services are structured because of other factors such as population characteristics, socio-economic circumstances, infrastructure, health status, and workforce mix and availability.

Social determinants of health—such as housing, education, employment, infrastructure and transport—can strongly influence the health of individuals and affect the sustainability and accessibility of health services. While PHNs are funded to address primary health care needs, they often build partnerships with other organisations that can more directly influence these social determinants.