



WESTERN HSC TRUST – EMERGENCY EYE CLINIC

REMINDERS & GUIDANCE POINTS FOR PRIMARY CARE OPTOMETRY REFERRERS

Western HSC Trust ophthalmology services are noting a significant increase in demand for their emergency eye service in Altnagelvin Area Hospital. Numbers of patients being referred to the service have increased over a comparable 7-month period (Jan – July) by 30% from 2024 to 2025. This increase is placing significant pressure on the eye clinic staff and giving rise to challenges for patients with long wait times being experienced. Primary care optometrists are the first point of contact for many patients and therefore generate the majority of referrals to the emergency eye clinic. As such, they have a critical role in ensuring patients access the care they need – right patient, right place and right time. To help the acute eyecare pathway run as efficiently as possible you are reminded of the following points:

Reminder about the process of attending the emergency eye service

- ❖ When a patient is assigned a time to attend the emergency eye clinic in the hospital, you must make it clear to the patient that this is **not** their appointment time – it is a recommended hospital arrival time and depending on the number of patients who are attending the clinic wait times can be long – sometimes up to 6 hours.
- ❖ Patients should be advised to be prepared for a wait and, where appropriate, to bring any medication or refreshments that may be required whilst waiting.
- ❖ Patients should be reminded of the likely use of dilating drops by eye clinic staff and advised of the implications for driving etc...



Reminder of Referral Guidelines and Referral Pathways

You are reminded of the following in relation to the clinical conditions and category of patients presenting:

❖ **Children Under 16yrs old**

Paediatric Ophthalmology referral guidance was provided to ALL optometry contractors in 2023 following the reconfiguration of paediatric ophthalmology services at a regional level. This guidance must be adhered to as Western HSC Trust do not provide a paediatric ophthalmology service. Patients under 16yrs of age who require ophthalmology services should be referred to the Belfast HSC Trust in line with the guidance provided - **this includes children with acute eye presentations**. Optometrists in primary care **must** refer to this guidance when assessing a child with an emergency/urgent/acute eye problem and discuss the arrangements for paediatric ophthalmology with the parents/carers of the child. Not knowing the correct referral pathway for the suspected condition risks delay in the patient accessing the correct service. Paediatric Ophthalmology referral guidance is hosted at the following weblinks:

- [Paediatric Ophthalmology Referral Poster – Summary of Clinical Referral Pathways](#)
- [Paediatric Ophthalmology CCG Referral Pathway Changes July 2023 \(final\)](#)
- [Paediatric Ophthalmology - Guidance for Primary Care](#)
- [All Paediatric Eyecare Information – BSO Website](#)

NOTE: All optometrists working in practice must familiarise themselves with the process of referring a child (under 16yrs) to the emergency eye services in Belfast HSC Trust, including the arrangements for referrals at weekend and out of hours.



❖ **Corneal/Conjunctival/Eyelid Foreign Bodies**

Adult patients within the Western HSC Trust catchment area (please ensure patient residential postcode is appropriate) who present with an ophthalmic foreign body which requires referral to the hospital should be referred via the **Phone First** referral pathway for access to Minor Injuries service. These patients should **not**, as the primary referral pathway, be directed to the emergency eye clinic in Altnagelvin Area Hospital.

When a patient who resides in the catchment area for Western HSC Trust eye services presents to a primary care optometrist with an ophthalmic foreign body, the optometrist should explain that Phone First (Western HSC Trust) is the appropriate first point of contact for them. The Phone First service requires the patient to speak to the staff themselves and usual process is that a nurse calls the patient to arrange an attendance at the Minor Injuries service.

- The Western HSC Trust '**Phone First**' service operates from 08:00am to 12midnight, seven days a week using the following contact options: The 'Phone First' number to ring is **0300 020 6000**, the 'Phone First' text relay number is 0870 240 5152

❖ **Patient Residential Postcodes – Western HSC Trust Ophthalmology services**

Optometrists are reminded of the need to check the patient's residential postcode before referring a patient to any of the Western HSC Trust Ophthalmology services, **including** the emergency eye clinic. Advice on this was issued to all optometry practices in early 2025 and can be accessed at the weblink noted below. Please ensure that only patients whose residential postcode is highlighted are referred to Western HSC Trust ophthalmology services. To generate a referral for patient whose residential postcode is not in the catchment area for the relevant HSC Trust risks delay, referrals may be rejected, and you may be required to generate a further referral to the appropriate HSC Trust ophthalmology services. Please read the guidance at the following link: [Patient Residential Postcode – Western HSC Trust Ophthalmology Services](#)