



Low cost ways to increase NHS Health Check attendance: results from a randomised controlled trial

Summary

Research shows that small changes to the way patients are invited to attend the NHS Health Check can substantially increase uptake. Southwark Council worked with the Department of Health (DH) to test ways to optimise the letters and text messages inviting patients to an NHS Health Check. The most successful combination of letter and text messages resulted in a **12 percentage point increase in uptake – at minimal cost.**

Background

The NHS Health Check aims to prevent heart disease, kidney disease, stroke and diabetes in people aged 40 to 74. The programme is a key priority for Public Health England (PHE) and local authorities in their efforts to promote healthy lifestyles and prevent premature mortality. However, nationally only about 50% of people invited for a check take up the offer. Take up of appointments by those invited by letter in Southwark was just 18% in 2012-13.¹ Teresa Edmans, Southwark's NHS Health Check programme manager, was keen to find ways to increase uptake. This led to a collaboration with the behavioural insights team in DH.

Testing new ideas informed by behavioural insights


Most patients are invited for a check via a letter from their GPs. This research tested the impact of interventions informed by insights from behavioural science. These insights prompted small, pragmatic and very low cost or free changes to the invitation process – for example, how messages are framed. These changes were designed to fit within existing practice so that they could easily be applied at scale.

The DH behavioural insights team ran a large randomised controlled trial to test the impact of three new invitation letters and two accompanying text messages. Each new letter was shorter than the standard invitation letter and used simpler language. Accompanying text messages were sent a week before the invitation letter to prime participants to expect a letter; or a week after to remind participants that they had received a letter.² The letters and text messages are set out here:

¹ Overall uptake in Southwark was 55% in 2013-14, based on those invited by letter and those invited opportunistically (eg, when at a GP appointment).

² The text messages in this trial cost £0.06 each. This has reduced since the trial was conducted.

Control: the standard invitation letter in use, based on the national template


Screening Services
South London PCSS
1st floor, Cantilever House
Eltham Road
London
SE12 8RN

Ref: 123456
NHS NO: 1234567890
20 September 2013

Ref: CHD
Mr Test Patient
1st Line
2nd Line
3rd Line
4th Line
POST CODE

On behalf of
Sample Surgery

Dear Mr Test Patient

Invitation to a free health check

We are inviting you to have a free NHS Health Check. NHS Health Check is a national programme for people between 40 and 74.

The aim of the check is to assess your risk of developing heart disease, stroke, kidney disease or diabetes and then to work with you to reduce that risk. If we find any problems with your health we can also prescribe treatment.

The check should take about 20-30 minutes and is based on straightforward questions and measurements such as age, sex, family history, height, weight and blood pressure. We will also take a simple blood test to measure your cholesterol and glucose levels, in some cases.

Following the check, you will receive free personalised advice about what you can do to stay healthy, as well as treatment if this is necessary. There is good evidence that by taking early action, you can improve your health and reduce your likelihood of developing these conditions.

You can have your health check at a local pharmacy listed in the enclosed leaflet, or at your surgery (Sample Surgery). To book your check please ring 0203 4039 9999 and quote "NHS Health Check".

If you are unable to make it to the surgery you can also have your check done by the Southwark's Health Check Outreach Team. Please go to www.southwarkpct.nhs.uk and click on Healthy Living for information on outreach session in Southwark.


Take a look at the enclosed leaflet for more information about the NHS Health Check and how it could benefit you.

Yours sincerely
Dr Doctor

High quality care for all, now and for future generations

LEW107

Letter 1 personalised commitment: includes a personalised tear-off slip for participants to record the date and time of their check



Dear <to be inserted by mail merge>

Your NHS Health Check is now due.

Please call <to be inserted by mail merge> to book your appointment at your GP's surgery and record this on the tear off slip below.

You can also have your health check at your local pharmacy listed in the enclosed leaflet. To book, please ring 0203 4039 9999 and quote 'NHS Health Check'.

Yours sincerely

Dr <to be inserted by mail merge>

Please record the date and time of your appointment and stick it on your fridge.

Name: <to be inserted by mail merge>
GP practice: <to be inserted by mail merge>

I am going to my NHS Health Check on __/__/13 **at** ____am/pm

Practice address: <to be inserted by mail merge>

Letter 2 deadline commitment: similar to letter 1, with the tear-off slip, but uses more direct language to encourage quick action by a deadline (“Your NHS Health Check is due in August”)

NHS

Dear <to be inserted by mail merge>

Your NHS Health Check is due in August.

Please call <to be inserted by mail merge> as soon as possible to make sure you get your appointment at your GP's surgery and record this on the tear off slip below.

You can also have your health check at your local pharmacy listed in the enclosed leaflet. To book, please ring 0203 4039 9999 and quote 'NHS Health Check'.

Yours sincerely

Dr <to be inserted by mail merge>

Please record the date and time of your appointment and stick it on your fridge.

Name: <to be inserted by mail merge>

GP practice: <to be inserted by mail merge>

I am going to my NHS Health Check on ___/___/13 at ___ am/pm

Practice address: <to be inserted by mail merge>



Letter 3 testimonials: uses social norms messages (“In Southwark, thousands of people like you have attended their health check”) and testimonials from local residents

NHS

Dear <to be inserted by mail merge>

Your NHS Health Check is now due.

In Southwark, thousands of people like you have attended their health check and benefited from personalised health advice.

Please call <to be inserted by mail merge> to book your appointment at your GP's surgery.

You can also have your health check at your local pharmacy listed in the enclosed leaflet. To book, please ring 0203 4039 9999 and quote 'NHS Health Check'.

Yours sincerely

Dr <to be inserted by mail merge>

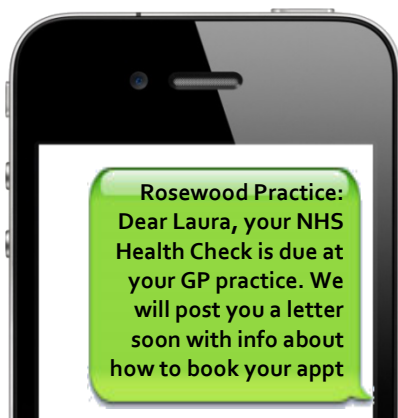
How an NHS Health Check helped me

"My cholesterol was a little high, but I got peace of mind regarding my state of health generally. Since the health check, I've cut down on alcohol and made some small changes to my diet"
Mr DC, Southwark

"I already knew I was a bit overweight, but having a health check was a wake up call which helped me understand the risks of developing diabetes and heart disease. I've changed my eating habits, eating smaller portions, less sugar and oily food, and more salad and vegetables. I exercise a lot more - I've joined an aerobics class and really enjoy going for brisk walks. I've already lost nearly half a stone and would definitely advise others to go for it!"
Ms CD, Southwark

(7/16/13)

Primer text message



Reminder text message

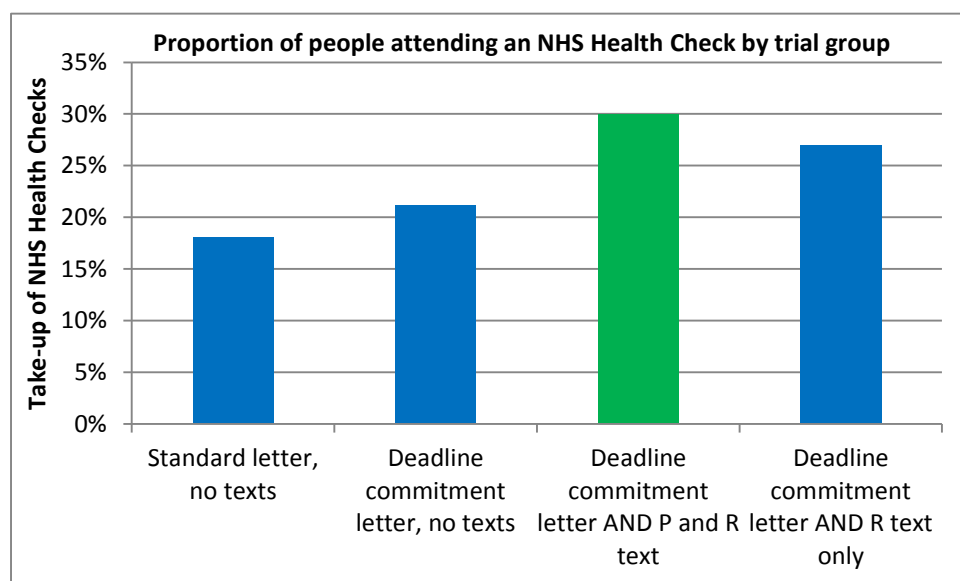


Method

The trial included 28 GP practices. People eligible to receive a check were randomly allocated to receive either the standard letter or one of the new letters; and again randomly allocated to receive the text message primer, the reminder, both or neither. Invitees were allocated to one of 16 groups. The outcome measure was whether the participant attended an NHS Health Check.³ Over 13,800 people in Southwark took part between November 2013 and December 2014.

Results

The most successful invitation was letter 2: the deadline commitment letter accompanied by primer and reminder text messages. This increased uptake to 30% compared to 18% for the standard letter and no text messages – a statistically significant **12 percentage point increase in uptake**. The new letter on its own, without any text messages, increased uptake to 21% compared to the standard letter and no text messages (18% uptake).



³ All patient data was anonymised.

The results also indicate that a combination of the deadline commitment letter and a reminder text message (no primer message) is nearly as effective. So if only one text message per person can be sent, a reminder is likely to be more effective than a primer.

Discussion

These results show a substantially larger effect than a similar trial in 2013 with Medway Council. While the behavioural insights team built on what was learnt from the first trial,⁴ the scale of the improvement reported here was unexpected. DH statisticians have closely scrutinised these results, but they appear robust.

The effect of this intervention remains even when other important demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity) and GP practice are controlled for. The deadline commitment letter and text messages increased attendance across all ages, ethnicities and both genders, and across all GP practices.

Further analysis is underway and will later be published in a peer-reviewed journal. Additional analysis will look at the impact and cost if the commitment deadline letter and text messages were used across Southwark over a longer period.

Next steps

This paper sets out results from DH's trial with Southwark. Further information, alongside results from trials with Northamptonshire County Council and Medway County Council will be shared across the NHS Health Check network in the summer of 2015.

These results imply that behavioural insights can increase uptake of NHS Health Check at little extra cost. These changes could be adopted anywhere and even cost nothing if an invitation letter or text message is already being sent.

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Acknowledgements

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⁴ www.healthcheck.nhs.uk/document.php?o=588

Annex: full page copy of commitment deadline letter



Dear Mr Smith

Your NHS Health Check is due in August.

Please call 0207 356 8952 as soon as possible to make sure you get your appointment at your GP's surgery and record this on the tear off slip below.

You can also have your health check at your local pharmacy listed in the enclosed leaflet. To book, please ring 0203 4039 9999 and quote 'NHS Health Check'.

Yours sincerely

Dr Jones



Please record the date and time of your appointment and stick it on your fridge.

Name: Mr Smith

GP practice: Rosewood Practice

I am going to my NHS Health Check on __/__/15 at _____am/pm

Practice address: Rosewood Practice, London Road, London, E5 2PU

