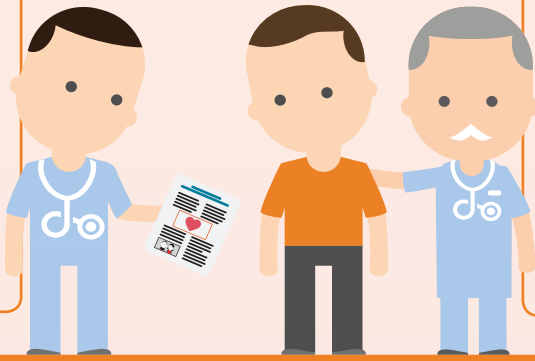


# What are 'clinical guidelines'?

Clinical guidelines are a set of recommendations developed by medical societies for healthcare professionals on how to treat specific health conditions. They help doctors and medical professionals make the most appropriate treatment decisions for their patients.<sup>1</sup>





They can cover a range of topics including:

- Tests to screen for or diagnose diseases and conditions
- What treatment may be needed when and for whom
- Advice on optimal care for patients

**Fact:** Analysis has shown that establishing clinical guidelines to support healthcare professionals can significantly improve the quality of patient care.<sup>2</sup>

## How are clinical guidelines generally agreed?

Developing guidelines can be a complex and lengthy process in order to ensure the final recommendations are based on robust evidence – but it broadly consists of the following stages:

-  **Agree the topic**  
The first step is that an expert group (such as the American Heart Association) will discuss the need to develop or update guidelines.
-  **Create a panel of authors:**  
A mixed group of specialists with extensive knowledge and experience with the disease/condition being assessed will come together to author the guidelines.
-  **Review the evidence:**  
The authors will collect and review all available research on the relevant disease in order to make a well informed recommendation.
-  **Agree a recommendation:**  
Using this research, and the opinions of leading experts, the authors will discuss, debate and then agree a recommendation to include in the guidelines.
-  **Confirmation and guidelines update:**  
The recommendation is reviewed by a separate panel of experts, and if agreed, is included in updated guidelines which will be published for the medical community.

## Where are guidelines used?

Guidelines are usually developed on a national or international level, but can be developed or adapted locally and regionally too, by medical societies or government bodies.

Examples of guidelines include:

- Global health guidelines from the **World Health Organization (WHO)**
- Region-wide guidelines from the **European Society of Cardiology (ESC)**
- National guidelines from the **American Heart Association (AHA)**, the **National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, England)**, **Haute Autorité de Santé (HAS, France)**, **Agencia de Calidad del Sistema Nacional de Salud (Spain)** and **Bundesärztekammer (Germany)**

## What does this mean for patients?

Guidelines can be a useful tool for doctors in helping to shape their decisions. Every patient is different and not all patients fit perfectly into a set of guidelines.

Doctors use the guidelines alongside their own experience, and the individual circumstances and wishes of their patients, to agree the most appropriate plan of action.

### References

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2. Grimshaw, J. and Russell, I. (1993) 'Effect of clinical guidelines on medical practice: A systematic review of rigorous evaluations', *Lancet*, 342(8883), pp. 1317–22. doi: 10.1016/0140-6736(93)92244-N. Available here: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/7901634>