



# Seafarer Health

A guide to consultations with health professionals

(GPs, hospital medical services, optometrists, dentists etc.)

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The aim of this guide is to steer both seafarers and health professionals through their encounters with one another in ways that improve outcomes and contribute to ensuring that both the general and special health care needs of seafarers are met. The focus of this guide is on seafarers based in the UK, but many of the topics discussed are equally relevant worldwide. It does not specifically cover the healthcare arrangements for military personnel as they have their own dedicated provisions. Leisure sailors such as non-commercial yacht crew are also not directly considered.

**There are three parts to the guide:**

- For seafarers
- For health care providers.
- Sources of further information





## Guidance for seafarers

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Many of the doctors you contact will have little knowledge of the working lives of seafarers, the risks these may pose and the requirements for medical fitness. You will need to come to any consultation prepared to explain these. You may also need to inform practice receptionists and others who act as gatekeepers for access to primary care that you are a seafarer and this means that you have health care requirements that can differ from those of onshore patients.

Your concerns about health will be familiar to any doctor but the implications of these in terms of fitness for work as well as your limited availability for investigations, treatment and follow up will not. They will also not know about the physical and mental stresses of working at sea and, without your help, will not be able to give you good advice on the best way to come through whatever is concerning you and help you return as soon as possible to work at sea.

It is a good idea to download and print this guidance, identify which category of contact with healthcare best fits your situation and take a copy with you to your consultation.

You also need to take along clear information on your future pattern of work, especially identifying your future periods of leave so that, if necessary and justified, follow up and treatment can take place during such times.

Some medical conditions will affect your fitness to work at sea. You may need to return to see an MCA Approved Doctor if you develop a new illness or have any changes to an existing medical condition or its treatment. They will assess your fitness against the MCA medical standards even if your current certificate is still in date. If you have any medical reports or test result these should be taken with you and shown to the Approved Doctor.

Keeping your employer informed about any recommendations for investigation or treatment, if they are understanding, can help you ensure that you can be available at the right time to keep future appointments.

# Guidance for health care providers

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Seafarers work, often for long periods, without access to normal health care provisions. They also may perform tasks on which can put others at risk, hence they are required to meet internationally agreed medical fitness standards.

A seafarer may come to see you with a health problem or concern; to receive routine treatment or preventative measures, or by referral from another health professional for diagnosis or treatment. You will need to take account of their work in prioritising and deciding on their clinical needs.

There is great diversity in maritime jobs, from inshore fishing, harbour duties or work on local ferries to crewing distant water vessels. Most seafarers are directly responsible for the operation of the vessel but some, such as scientists and customer service staff, may have markedly different duties.

The features of seafaring that make for a special pattern of health care needs are:

1. Safety-critical tasks on which the security of the vessel and other crew members may depend, such as navigating the vessel
2. Emergency duties, such as fighting fires on board
3. Prolonged periods at sea distant from onshore medical facilities
4. Work in a wide range of climate zones
5. Living and working with a small team of other crew members in a hierarchical management structure
6. Flying to join a ship and being ashore in unfamiliar ports
7. Exposure to injury and illness from risks on board or in port



**1. Medical fitness assessments.** For many seafarers assessments are performed by doctors approved by the national maritime authority (in UK the Maritime and Coastguard Agency), for others (generally those on smaller coastal vessels) a questionnaire completed by the seafarer's GP and submitted to the maritime authority is required. Assessments are directed at ensuring that routine and emergency duties can be safely performed as well as to identify any medical conditions that are likely to arise while distant from medical care and be a risk to the seafarer or to others on board. Some employers or their insurers impose additional medical requirements aimed at reducing the operational consequences of ill-health at sea.

You may be asked to provide information by an Approved Doctor or to complete a fitness assessment questionnaire by a seafarer. You may also be asked to arrange diagnostic tests or other procedures if an Approved Doctor identifies a previously unrecognised illness or medical risk factor. These may be outside the recommendations for normal onshore care but are required because of the need to work safely while distant from healthcare.

**2. Seafarers travelling to or docking in ports in other climate zones or where hygiene standards differ from their home country will be advised or required to have additional immunisations.** Some employers arrange these, others may tell the seafarer to organise this themselves.

You may be asked to provide immunisations required for distant travel. It is also important to check that normal UK requirements, for instance for protection against tetanus, are up to date. The employer is responsible for providing malaria prophylaxis, but you may be asked if there are any contraindications to its use.

**3. Seafarers who develop a new medical condition or seek advice on health issues may book an appointment,** usually during a leave period, but occasionally prior to seeking work at sea. They should inform you of their occupation as this can affect advice given and decisions on investigation and treatment.

If someone is considering a seafaring career you may be able advise them by checking if their condition is one that could affect their employment, information can be found in the fitness standards issued by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (see Sources of Information). If a seafarer currently holds a medical fitness certificate you should advise them to contact the Approved Doctor who did their last fitness assessment for review.

If further investigations, hospital referral or other future actions are indicated you need to take account of the seafarer's pattern of leave and sea-time as this is often quite inflexible because of crew change arrangements. If the condition is potentially serious it is justifiable to inform the seafarer that they should remain ashore until investigation and any treatment is completed. If this is not so then, if feasible, appointments should be negotiated that fit with times ashore. With the seafarer's consent, a note to their employer about care plans can be very helpful.

The Dreadnought Unit at Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital in London provides, in normal times, a priority investigation and treatment service for seafarers (see Sources of Information).

#### 4. Seafarers requiring urgent medical attention.

This may arise during leave or in port, with attendance at a GP surgery (sometimes arranged by the port agent of the shipping company), at a hospital A and E department, or at a dentist for treatment of an acute dental problem. The ship operator may sometimes be prepared to pay for treatment outside the NHS, if this is available and can be justified. The doctor or dentist who examines them should provide the seafarer with a medical report and treatment plan to take with them for future reference.

Time will often be of the essence if urgent care is needed during a port call as sailing times are inflexible and failing to be onboard in time will often mean either flying to the next port or even repatriation and termination of contract. Time constraints need to be determined as soon as possible and, where it is clinically feasible, arranging for investigation and treatment to fit within them. For seafarers on leave the approach given for a new medical condition (above) is appropriate.

#### 5. Seafarers who have long term medical conditions

requiring continuing medication or follow up checks will often remain fit to work at sea if they have had their condition assessed by an MCA Approved Doctor. However, if their medication is changed or they develop new health problems they should be referred to the Approved Doctor who issued their current medical certificate.

Periods at sea may be longer than the normal duration of prescriptions. In emergencies or because of travel disruption they may last for longer than planned. It is essential to provide the seafarer with sufficient medications to cover this period. Some countries are hypersensitive about seafarers holding any medication (such as Tramadol and Ritalin) that can be abused or which has street value. Avoid such medications when this can safely be done and, if this is not possible, provide the seafarer with a formal letter indicating the reasons that you have prescribed it for this individual.

Follow up appointments need to be arranged to fit with leave times. If this is not clinically justifiable then you need to advise the seafarer that they cannot safely continue with their current pattern of leave and sea time.

#### 6. Seafarers who have returned home following injury or illness while at sea

will require access to support for rehabilitation and, where possible, return to work.

Help is needed to secure rehabilitation. For musculoskeletal and mental health problems the Seafarers Hospital Society can assist you (See Sources of Information). In some circumstances grants to help with daily living may be available. At times there may be associated issues of compensation and you may be asked by seafarer trade unions or insurers for clinical assessments. The seafarer's consent should always be obtained before providing such a clinical assessment.

## 7. Seafarers who may have ill-health arising from their work.

The commonest problems are skin and lung conditions, late effects from acute exposure to toxic agents and musculoskeletal problems. Mental distress or more serious mental illness from poor working arrangements is seen to be a growing area of concern.

It is the employer's responsibility under international and national law to minimise risks to health from work. If you or the seafarer think there may be an occupational link to their condition you need to obtain as much relevant information as possible and be ready to pass this on to either the seafarer's trade union, their employer or the Maritime and Coastguard Agency depending on the wishes and consent of the seafarers, who may well be worried about the effect of such a condition on their employability. Any issues of compensation are best left to others, based on any clinical assessments that you have done.



# Sources of information

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## MARITIME AND COASTGUARD AGENCY

### Seafarer Medical Examination Guidance

[www.gov.uk/guidance/seafarers-medical-certification-guidance](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/seafarers-medical-certification-guidance)

### Approved Doctors based in UK

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/mca-approved-doctors-uk-based](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mca-approved-doctors-uk-based)

### Seafarer medical certificates

[www.gov.uk/seafarer-medical-certificates](http://www.gov.uk/seafarer-medical-certificates)

### Seafarer medical fitness standards (link may change when standards updated)

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/761496/MSN\\_1886\\_\\_M\\_F\\_\\_MLC\\_and\\_ILO\\_188\\_work\\_in\\_fishing\\_convention\\_medical\\_examination\\_system\\_appointment\\_of\\_approved\\_doctors\\_and\\_medical\\_and\\_eyesight\\_standards.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/761496/MSN_1886__M_F__MLC_and_ILO_188_work_in_fishing_convention_medical_examination_system_appointment_of_approved_doctors_and_medical_and_eyesight_standards.pdf)

### Approved Doctor's Manual (additional information on application of fitness standards)

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-approved-doctors-manual](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-approved-doctors-manual)

## SEAFARERS HOSPITAL SOCIETY

### Fast-track Physiotherapy

[www.seahospital.org.uk/help-for-you/fast-track-physiotherapy/](http://www.seahospital.org.uk/help-for-you/fast-track-physiotherapy/)

### Mental health and wellbeing – Togetherall

[www.seahospital.org.uk/help-for-you/mental-health-and-wellbeing/](http://www.seahospital.org.uk/help-for-you/mental-health-and-wellbeing/)

### Dreadnought Medical Services

[www.seahospital.org.uk/help-for-you/dreadnought-special-medical-service-for-seafarers/](http://www.seahospital.org.uk/help-for-you/dreadnought-special-medical-service-for-seafarers/)

## INTERNATIONAL SOURCES

### International Seafarers Welfare and Assistance Network

[www.seafarerswelfare.org](http://www.seafarerswelfare.org)

### ILO/IMO Guidelines on seafarer medical examinations

[www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines/WCMS\\_174794/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines/WCMS_174794/lang--en/index.htm)

### ILO Maritime Labour Convention

[www.ilo.org/global/standards/maritime-labour-convention/text/WCMS\\_763684/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/standards/maritime-labour-convention/text/WCMS_763684/lang--en/index.htm)

### Textbook of Maritime Health (3rd Edition) Norwegian Centre for Maritime and Diving Medicine, Bergen

<https://textbook.maritimemedicine.com>



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