



Department  
of Health

## A small change to the invitation letter can increase uptake of the NHS Health Check

New results from a research trial show that making small changes to the NHS Health Check invitation letter can **increase uptake at no extra cost**. A DH research team worked with Medway Council to rewrite the invitation letter and robustly test its impact. This resulted in a **13% increase in uptake** (four percentage points). Further studies of this type are underway. The results will be shared when available.

### Method

The NHS Health Checks programme manager in Medway was keen to find ways to increase uptake rates, She offered to collaborate with a DH research team to test the team's ideas in a real life setting. Uptake in Medway is currently around 30%<sup>1</sup>.

The trial made small changes to the invitation letter based on an understanding of how people behave. This type of intervention is sometimes known as a 'nudge' technique. We changed the letter in **three ways** compared to the existing letter:

- We added a **tear-off slip** for participants to record the date and time of their NHS Health Check. This acts as a form of commitment from the invitee to attend their appointment.
- We changed the language so it was more direct and **focused on the action** the recipient needed to take (we used 'due' rather than 'invited')
- We **shortened the text** and used **simpler language**

The trial was conducted with four GP practices<sup>2</sup>. Invitees were allocated to receive either a control letter (based on the national template letter) or a new letter. The participants were allocated in a quasi-random way to the two trial groups<sup>3</sup>. The outcome measure was whether the participant attended their NHS Health Check or not<sup>4</sup>. 3,511 people participated in the trial, which ran between May and October 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> 2013-14, NHS Health Check Data, [http://www.healthcheck.nhs.uk/interactive\\_map/south\\_of\\_england/](http://www.healthcheck.nhs.uk/interactive_map/south_of_england/)

<sup>2</sup> These practices were chosen due to their willingness to participate in the trial and the suitability of their IT systems. Some of these practices required a blood test to be taken before attending the Health Check. This meant that the letters were slightly different in each practice; however the same changes were made to each of the letters allowing the trial results to be compared across practices.

<sup>3</sup> Participants were allocated to the trial arms based on the first letter of their surname, this was to minimise the risk of bias. The way the letters are sent in Medway meant that it was impossible to randomly allocate participants into the two arms.

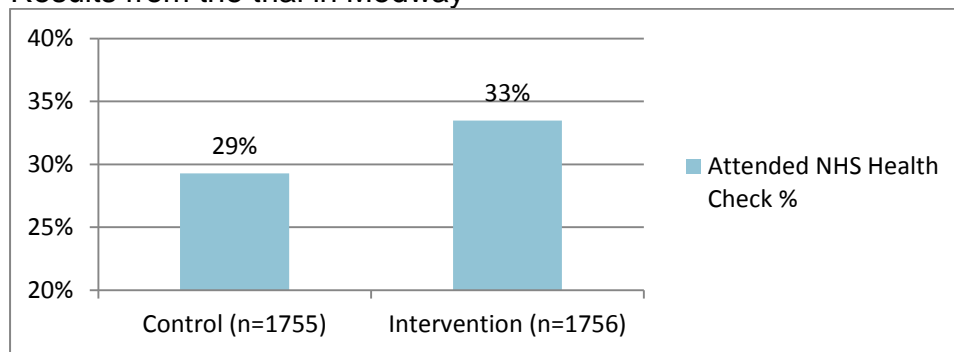
<sup>4</sup> All patient data was anonymised.

## Results

More participants (33%<sup>5</sup>) who received the intervention letter attended their NHS Health Check than those who received the control letter (29%<sup>6</sup>), as shown in the chart. This equates to a **13% increase in uptake** between the two letters. This is a statistically significant finding (at the 5% level<sup>7</sup>). This means we can be confident that the difference between the two results is very unlikely to be down to chance.

This suggests that more people attend their NHS Health Check after receiving an intervention letter, as opposed to a control letter.

### Results from the trial in Medway



## Next steps

These results show that behavioural ‘nudges’ can increase uptake of NHS Health Checks without spending any more money. These changes could be adopted anywhere and cost nothing to implement if an invitation letter is already being sent. This new letter will be rolled-out across Medway in 2014. The results from the trial suggest that the new letter could result in around **600 additional people attending their NHS Health Check in Medway per year**<sup>8</sup>.

The DH Behaviour Change team is running other trials to see if other simple changes to the invitation process can increase uptake, and whether similar results are achievable in other localities. **Trials are underway in Southwark, Stoke and Northamptonshire.** These will report in 2014. Interventions that we are testing include:

- Sending a text message before the invitation letter
- use of testimonials from patients who had already had an NHS Health Check
- Providing a myth busting Q&A as part of the letter

**Further information**, including a more detailed report of this trial, is available on the NHS Health Checks website. The DH Behaviour Change Team can be contacted at [annabelle.bonus@dh.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:annabelle.bonus@dh.gsi.gov.uk) or [daniel.berry@dh.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:daniel.berry@dh.gsi.gov.uk).

<sup>5</sup> 95% CI: 31% to 36%

<sup>6</sup> 95% CI: 27% to 31%

<sup>7</sup> p=0.007

<sup>8</sup> Based on a 13% increase on the 2013-14 attendance figures.

## **Annex 1: Control letter (the national template letter)**

Dear Xxxx

We are inviting you to attend your free NHS Health Check.

NHS Health Checks are being offered to people aged between 40 and 74 once every five years.

The check is to assess your risk of developing heart disease, stroke, kidney disease or diabetes. If there are any warning signs, then together we can do something about it.

By taking early action, you can improve your health and prevent the onset of these conditions. There is good evidence for this.

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. You will also need a simple blood test to measure your cholesterol level.

Following the check, you will receive free personalised advice about what you can do to stay healthy.

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

Please call the surgery to book your appointment on XXXXXXXX. Your appointment should be after you have had your blood test – see enclosed form about where to go for this.

Yours sincerely,

Dr XXXX

**Annex2: Intervention letter (informed by behavioural insights)**

Dear Xxxx

**You are due to attend your NHS Health Check.**

**Please call us on XXXXXX to book your appointment and record the date and time on the slip below.** Your appointment date should be after you have had your blood test – see enclosed details about where to go for this.

Take a look at the enclosed information about the NHS Health Check and how it would benefit you.

Yours sincerely,

Dr XXXXXXXXXXXX

**My blood test is at \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_**  
*location date time*

**My NHS Health Check is at \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_**  
*location date time*

