

SUMMARY

- The OOHC Health Pathway Program is an essential service and will continue during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there may be delays or other local impacts on services due to the health system response to the pandemic.
- Refer children and young people to the OOHC Health Pathway when they enter statutory care to ensure:
 - their health assessments occur
 - they receive a Health Management Plan.
- Check carers know how to access health services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Assist carers, children and/or young people to access telehealth with a tablet or other device when needed.
- Provide carers with information about [COVID-19](#) so they're aware of the symptoms and their responsibilities if a child or young person in their care is unwell.
- Support children, young people and carers to access and follow NSW guidelines on [how to protect yourself and others](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Keep up-to-date with current COVID-19 advice and information on the [NSW Government website](#)
- Make contact with your [OOHC Health Coordinator](#) if you have any questions about the OOHC Health Pathway during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information:

If you have specific questions about how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect the implementation of the OOHC Health Pathway email your [OOHC Health Coordinator](#) or DCJ at COVID19.Support@facs.nsw.gov.au

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why is the health of children and young people in OOHC important during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Children and young people in care have increased physical, developmental, emotional and mental health needs compared to their peers in the general community.

These increased health needs may make children and young people in OOHC more vulnerable to the negative impacts of responses to COVID-19. Children and young people may find the current uncertainty and changes to daily routines particularly stressful. Over the coming months this increased stress may impact on their behaviour, mental health and wellbeing.

It is important that health practitioners, caseworkers and carers work together to ensure the health needs of children and young people in OOHC continue to be identified and addressed.

How do children and young people in OOHC receive support to meet their health needs?

The OOHC Health Pathway was developed in 2010 to improve health outcomes for children and young people entering statutory OOHC in NSW. The Pathway is a joint initiative of the NSW Ministry of Health and the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ).

The OOHC Health Pathway provides children and young people with **health assessment, planning, implementation and review**.

The Pathway is supported by an [OOHC Health Coordinator](#) employed in each Local Health District. This person is responsible for coordinating the health assessment, planning and review process. More information about the OOHC Health Pathway is available on the [DCJ website](#).

Will the OOHC Health Pathway continue to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yes, the NSW Ministry of Health has advised DCJ that the OOHC Health Pathway will continue to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic. The OOHC Health Pathway is an essential health program for children and young people in care. All essential public health programs will continue to operate during the pandemic. However, there may be some delay between referral and an appointment compared with prior to the pandemic.

Referrals should also continue to be made for other health services as required. Some health services may be suspended due to the pandemic e.g. elective surgery, non-urgent oral health services, private optometry but referrals should still be made and noted in the Health Management Plan.

Will the way that the OOHC Health Pathway operates change during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This depends on your Local Health District. Changes may occur to the way the following stages of the Pathway will operate during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Initial Pathway referral undertaken by DCJ
- Primary health assessments
- Comprehensive health assessments
- Implementation of Health Management Plans
- Reviewing Health Management Plans

These changes, as outlined below, will ensure continuity of health service delivery to children and young people and mitigate any risks.

Referral of children and young people to the OOHC Health Pathway

DCJ should continue to refer children and young people to the OOHC Health Pathway by completing the [OOHC Health Referral Form](#).

Implementing the Out-of-home care (OOHC) Health Pathway during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic – caseworker factsheet

Updated July 2021

Young people aged 14 years and over are required to consent to the referral and would normally provide this in writing. DCJ caseworkers can obtain verbal consent from a young person aged 14 years and over to participate on the Pathway if it is difficult to obtain in writing. When it becomes possible to see the young person, they can then obtain their written consent.

Primary health assessments for children and young people entering care

[The OOHC Health Coordinator](#) will ensure that the initial health assessment for children and young people entering care continues during the COVID-19 pandemic. The child or young person's carer will be advised which health practitioner will conduct the assessment and how it will be done.

The OOHC Health Pathway Program aims to commence a primary health assessment for children and young people within 30 days of entering statutory care. The professional who conducts the assessment varies between health districts. It may be conducted by a General Practitioner (GP), Aboriginal Medical Health Service, a Child and Family Health Nurse or Youth Health service.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, telephone or video meetings may need to be used to conduct the assessment instead of face to face meetings. There may also be instances where parts of the assessment are conducted over the phone and other parts are conducted through face to face contact.

Comprehensive health assessments for children and young people entering care

After the primary health assessment is conducted, the health professional may need to refer the child or young person for a comprehensive paediatric or multidisciplinary health assessment.

The way this assessment is conducted may also change during the COVID-19 pandemic. If a child or young person needs to be examined by a health practitioner, the carer will be advised by the [OOHC Health Coordinator](#) or the assessing health professional. Health care practitioners will follow current infection control guidelines, which may require use of personal protective equipment. This may change over time.

Health Management Plans – accessing health services

All children and young people in statutory OOHC receive a Health Management Plan which records the assessments that have occurred and the health services they require. The Health Management Plan should be followed as much as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that children and young people's health needs are met. It is essential any health checks or components of screening and assessment not attended be noted in the Health Management Plan for follow up as soon as possible.

[The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee](#) suggests immunosuppression is the most significant risk for serious illness from COVID-19 for children. Continued access to health services is essential for managing children and young people with chronic health conditions in particular.

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Updated July 2021

Delivery of health services may change during this time or may vary according to the child or young person's Local Health District. Carers can obtain advice from their [OOHC Health Coordinator](#) or from their individual health practitioners about the way specific health services will be provided during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Access to General Practitioners

The Australian Government has increased bulk billing incentive for GPs for face-to-face and telehealth services in response to COVID-19. More information about this is available [here](#)

This initiative should help to ensure that children and young people are provided with free, timely and appropriate access to essential primary health services when required.

Access to mental health services

All children and young people may find the pandemic a time of increased uncertainty and will benefit from stability, routine and a reassuring adult explaining what the pandemic means.

Children and young people with existing mental health issues may find the current uncertainty around the COVID-19 pandemic particularly difficult. They may require additional mental health support.

Children and young people should continue to access supports through their existing mental health team. Need for additional mental health supports should be discussed and reflected where possible in the child or young person's Health Management Plan and Case Plan.

Children and young people can access digital mental health services if needed, including:

- [Beyond Blue](#) - free counselling by mental health professionals provided for all people in Australia 24/7, both online and over the phone on 1300 22 4636
- [Kids Helpline](#) - for children and young people up to 25 years that may need support both online and over the phone on 1800 55 1800
- [Headspace](#) - some [headspace centres](#) are adjusting their service delivery to incorporate online and phone counselling available by contacting 1800 650 890.

You can also encourage carers, children and young people to connect with their GP and/or seek referral to a mental health professional, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist.

Obtaining medications

Encourage carers to plan how they will obtain medication for children and young people if needed. GPs and paediatricians can send prescriptions directly to the carer's pharmacy. The child or young person's medication will then be sent to the carer and payment options determined. For more information visit the [Australian Health](#) website

Reviewing Health Management Plans

Children and young people's Health Management Plans should continue to be reviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

You can contact your [OOHC Health Coordinator](#) to request a review of a child or young person's Health Management Plan. Incorporate findings from the review into the child or young person's Case Plan.