



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

FACT SHEET

Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (Better Access) initiative

NEW TRANSITION ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE ALLIED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AVAILABLE UNDER THE BETTER ACCESS INITIATIVE

Key information for providers and consumers:

- In the 2011-12 Budget, changes to the Better Access initiative were announced as part of the *Delivering National Mental Health Reform* Budget package. These included reducing the number of Medicare rebates available for allied health services from 12 (up to 18 in 'exceptional circumstances') to 10 for individuals each calendar year. These changes began on 1 November 2011.
- On 1 February 2012 the Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, the Hon Mark Butler MP announced that the Government will be reinstating the additional six allied mental health services available under 'exceptional circumstances' for a further year to 31 December 2012.
- This provides time for providers and consumers to adapt to the new arrangements and for new mental health services to be established and build capacity to meet the needs of people with more complex needs.

March to December 2012

- The standard number of allied mental health services for which an individual can receive a Medicare rebate will continue to be 10 services per calendar year. Following the initial course of treatment (a maximum of six sessions), individuals can access more sessions upon review of up to 10 per calendar year.
- However, for the 2012 calendar year eligible individuals will be able to receive up to an additional six allied mental health services under 'exceptional circumstances'. This means that eligible individuals can receive up to 16 services where 'exceptional circumstances' apply.
- It is up to the referring medical practitioner (i.e. the GP) to determine that the individual meets the criteria for 'exceptional circumstances'. This is defined as a significant change in the individual's clinical condition or care circumstances which make it appropriate and necessary for the individual to access further services.
- Individuals who think they may be eligible to receive further allied mental health services under 'exceptional circumstances' should talk to their referring medical practitioner (i.e. their GP). The GP will need to provide a new referral for these services.
- Individuals will continue to be able to receive Medicare rebates for 10 group therapy services per calendar year, on top of their individual allied mental health services during the 2012 calendar year.
- Individuals will be eligible for an additional six allied mental health services under 'exceptional circumstances' from 1 March 2012 until 31 December 2012. This means that to receive a Medicare rebate for additional services provided under 'exceptional circumstances' an individual must receive these services during this period.

January 2013 onwards

- From 1 January 2013, the number of individual allied mental health services for which a person can receive a Medicare rebate will continue to be 10 individual services per calendar year. Following the initial course of treatment (a maximum of six sessions), individuals can access more sessions upon review of up to 10 per calendar year.
- Individuals will continue to be able to receive Medicare rebates for 10 group therapy services per calendar year, on top of their individual allied mental health services.
- Further information about the implementation of these changes and frequently asked questions is available at: www.health.gov.au/mentalhealth-betteraccess

Further information

Although Better Access was neither designed nor intended to provide intensive, ongoing therapy for people with severe and persistent mental illness, the Australian Government acknowledges that there are some people with more complex needs who are using the services provided under the Better Access initiative for care and support.

The Government acknowledges that reducing the number of allied mental health services for which people can receive a Medicare rebate has caused some concern and the Government has listened to these concerns.

The Government recognises that some of the new mental health services announced as part of the \$2.2 billion over five years *Delivering National Mental Health Reform* 2011-12 Budget package need time to build further capacity before they are able to provide care and support to people with more complex needs or people with severe and persistent mental illness.

The reintroduction of 'exceptional circumstances' up to 31 December 2012 provides time for allied mental health professionals and consumers to adapt to the new arrangements and time for the new mental health services to be able to build capacity to effectively respond to the needs of people with more complex needs.

GPs can also continue to refer people with more severe ongoing mental disorders to Medicare-subsidised consultant psychiatrist services, where 50 sessions can be provided per year, or state/territory specialised mental health services.

To help make psychiatrist services available in more areas, from 1 July 2011 the Government is providing new Medicare rebates for video psychiatrist consultations for patients living in regional, remote and outer metropolitan areas. GPs, specialists and other health professionals will be provided with financial incentives to help deliver these online services and funding will also be provided to support training and supervision for health professionals.

Enquiries

If you have any queries in relation to the transition arrangements for the Better Access initiative, please email betteraccess@health.gov.au

For more detailed information about MBS item descriptors and explanatory notes visit the Department of Health and Ageing's 'MBS Online' website at www.mbsonline.gov.au.

Information regarding eligibility, claiming and payment processes can be obtained from Medicare Australia on 132 150 (providers) or 132 011 (patients) or by visiting www.medicareaustralia.gov.au.

Information on the allied mental health Medicare items is also available on the Department's website www.health.gov.au/mentalhealth-betteraccess

February 2012