

General Practice Prescribing Data

About General Practice Prescribing Data

The UK government has made a commitment to transparency in the public sector. The Department of Health (DoH) has requested information is published on a regular basis about the prescribing performance of GP practices in the interests of good governance and public accountability.

The Business Services Organisation (BSO) is the provider of the data. GP practice level prescribing data is obtained from the BSO's prescribing and dispensing information systems and published on a monthly basis. The release of the GP Prescribing data is dependent on the completion of pharmacy payment processes but will be published here on or before the 10th of each month.

Datasets are available from April 2013 onwards.

The data covers prescriptions that are prescribed in Northern Ireland by a GP, nurse and any other non-medical prescribers (for example: pharmacists, optometrists, chiropodists and (potentially) radiographers) attached to a GP Practice. Those prescriptions that are subsequently dispensed by a community pharmacist, dispensing doctor or appliance supplier and submitted to BSO for payment, and have consequently been paid are included in the dataset.

If a patient does not take a prescription to the pharmacy for dispensing, then no information about that prescription is included in the dataset.

The data will include items that have been ordered on a stock form, but excludes hospice items. Private prescriptions are not included in this dataset.

For each GP practice in Northern Ireland, and for each medicine (by presentation), dressing and appliance, the following information is provided:

- The number of prescribed items that are dispensed,
- The quantity of tablets, capsules, liquid etcetera dispensed,
- The gross cost, and
- The actual cost.

Practice Information

All registered practices in Northern Ireland are included in this data where (in the relevant month) a prescription has been dispensed and submitted to the BSO by the dispensing contractor as a claim for payment.

Practice prescribing data is provided at the level of the GP practice, and includes prescribing for all GPs and other prescribers attached to that practice. Prescriptions issued from a branch surgery are included in the totals for the main practice site.

From month to month, practices may close and new practices may open. Alternatively, practices may merge to form one larger practice or split to form a number of smaller practices. For this reason, the number of GP practices may vary from one dataset to the next.

Each practice in the practice prescribing data file is identified by its assigned practice code. The use of unique practice codes allows the data to be linked to other datasets that use the same practice codes, and avoids potential confusion over practices that have similar names.

Accessing the Data

The files may be downloaded by selecting the appropriate links on the web page to download the files to a local computer. Data for each month will be provided separately in xlsx and csv formats. It is not possible to download data for only one practice or for any subset of practices.

Practice level prescribing data can be accessed in both excel and csv format from: <https://gpdatasets.hscni.net/> and in csv only format here: <https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset/gp-prescribing-data>

Data for each individual month will be provided separately and will consist of approximately 450,000 rows of data. Users should check that their software will be able to accept large files before downloading.

The supplementary file(s) of practice details are much smaller and are available in xls format.

Understanding the Data

The presentation level prescribing data for each month contains the following items:

- Practice code (3 characters)
- Year
- Month
- VTM_NM (Substance / Product name)
- VMP_NM (Generic Name)
- AMP_NM (Branded / Generic Name)
- Presentation
- Strength
- Total Items
- Total Quantity
- Total Gross Cost (£)
- Total Actual cost (£)
- British National Formulary (BNF) code (15 characters)
- BNF Classifications (Chapter, Section, Paragraph & Sub-Paragraph)

A **prescription item** is a single supply of a medicine, dressing or appliance written on a prescription form. If a prescription form includes three medicines it is counted as three prescription items.

Item figures do not provide any indication of the length of treatment or quantity of medicine prescribed. Patients with a long-term condition usually get regular prescriptions. However, while many prescriptions are for one month (28 or 30 days supply), items will be for varying length of treatment and quantity.

The **quantity** of a drug dispensed is measured in units depending on the formulation of the product, which is given in the drug name. Quantities should not be added together across preparations because of different strengths and formulations.

Where the formulation is tablet, capsule, ampoule, vial etc. the quantity will be the number of tablets, capsules, ampoules, vials etc.

Where the formulation is a liquid, the quantity will be the number of millilitres.

Where the formulation is a solid form (for example cream, gel, ointment), the quantity will be in grams.

The **Gross Cost** is the basic price of a drug, i.e. the price listed in the National Drug Tariff, concessionary price list, or in standard price lists.

Please note concessionary prices have to be approved by DoH. Where DoH instructs BSO to apply reimbursement prices for a particular month after payment has already been made, these are paid as an adjustment and these prices are known as late concessionary prices. Prior to May 2024 late concessionary prices were not included in the data. From May 2024 the dataset has been amended to include late concessionary price updates.

The Actual Cost is the estimated cost to the Health Service in Northern Ireland. Actual Cost is calculated by subtracting the discount per item from the Gross Cost.

The **BNF** is a joint publication by the British Medical Association and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, providing information on the selection, prescribing, dispensing and administration of medicines available in the UK. Medicines are classified by therapeutic group within the BNF. For example: gastro-intestinal, cardiovascular, respiratory, etc.

The BSO information system (the source of the practice level prescribing data) uses the therapeutic classifications defined in the BNF for chapters 1 – 15 and related sub-classifications. BSO has created 'pseudo BNF chapters' for items not included in BNF chapters 1 to 15. These are as follows:

- Chapter 18 – Preparations used in diagnosis
- Chapter 19 – Other drugs and preparations
- Chapter 20 – Dressings
- Chapter 21 – Appliances
- Chapter 22 – Incontinence appliances
- Chapter 23 – Stoma appliances, and
- Chapter 99 – Unclassified

There are some uncommon products that have not had a unique drug code or name assigned to them. These will appear with blank values under each of the name columns. In this case there is no recognised UK wide equivalent product. In addition, there are some less frequently prescribed products that have not had a unique drug code or name assigned to them by the BSO. These items are within pseudo BNF chapters and have not yet been coded in a similar way to England.

There may be instances where certain generic products will appear more than once for any given practice with the same BNF code attached. This is a result of the DM+D database model, which is used in producing the outputs, having separate records that identify specific manufacturers / suppliers. Any analysis of generic products should therefore be performed on VMP_NM or BNF Code, and not AMP_NM.

For more information on DM+D coding, please see the DM+D website: <https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/pharmacies-gp-practices-and-appliance-contractors/dictionary-medicines-and-devices-dmd>

GP Prescribing in England, Scotland and Wales

The practice level prescribing data currently being released from data held by the BSO, covers only practices in Northern Ireland. Information on data available for England, Scotland and Wales can be found at the following websites:

<https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/prescription-data/prescribing-data/english-prescribing-data-epd>

<https://www.opendata.nhs.scot/dataset?groups=prescribing-and-medicines>

<https://nwssp.nhs.wales/ourservices/primary-care-services/general-information/data-and-publications/pharmacy-practice-dispensing-data/>

Both datasets for England and Wales provide information at presentation level. The dataset for Scotland provides information at BNF Item Description level. All datasets are published monthly.

Whilst the data covers the same variables, there are a couple of differences between the NI data and that of England and Wales. For example, container fees are used in the English calculation of actual cost. These are not involved in the NI calculation. However, container fees only amount to less than £300 per month in NI.

Using the Data

Practice prescribing data requires careful interpretation. A broad range of factors influence the clinical need for a medicine and the decisions about which medicine is the most appropriate choice for an individual patient. This information should therefore not be looked at in isolation or be used to make judgements on the quality of prescribing. In addition, comparisons between GP practices requires further information about prescribing; number, age and sex of patients on the list; and knowledge about the medicines and why they are prescribed.

All practice level information down to presentation level is released as part of this dataset, but no patient information is contained in the data. It is not therefore possible to identify individual patients. For example, if only one patient receives a certain drug in a practice then the number of items prescribed and the cost for that medicine, which is already available in the public domain, will be in this dataset but it will not show which patient received it.

Practice prescribing data is based on information about prescriptions written and dispensed, and does not include any information about the number of patients who have been given prescriptions; some registered patients may have received no prescriptions at all.

Prescriptions given to patients tell the pharmacist what medicines to dispense for that patient, but do not contain any information on why the prescription was given to the patient, such as the clinical condition of the patient.

The number of patients registered with each practice as of the end of each quarter is contained within the Family Practitioner Service GMS Statistics spreadsheet under the Quarterly General Medical Services Statistics section in the BSO website located here:

<https://bso.hscni.net/directorates/operations/family-practitioner-services/directorates-operations-family-practitioner-services-information-unit/1776-2/>.

Please navigate to **table 1.7** to obtain the numbers of patients registered with each practice on a quarterly basis.