

Changes to the way people can access urgent and emergency care have been introduced this week to make sure they receive the right care from the right person in a safe and socially distanced way.

People who need clinical advice about an urgent, **but not a life-threatening emergency** matter, will now need to ring NHS 111 First rather than going straight to the Emergency Department (A&E) at the Royal Berkshire Hospital.

A specially trained operator will triage the 111 call and direct the person to the most appropriate medical support which could mean a booked appointment at the Minor Injuries Unit (MIU) on the hospital site.

In emergencies, for example, suspected heart attacks, strokes, or serious breathing difficulties, people should still dial 999 for help or make their way to ED immediately.

The new 111 First system, which is being rolled out across the country in December, is aimed at easing pressure on ED teams and making sure people are seen in the most appropriate medical setting. This could be MIU, or the local Walk in Centre in Reading, a GP, pharmacy, dentist, or optician.

The cramped waiting area at ED has made social distancing very difficult and the numbers of people attending for medical matters that can be handled elsewhere has also increased pressure on the teams. By triaging patients through the 111 call system, the ED clinicians will be able to devote their care to seriously ill emergency cases.

Dr Zac Etheridge Clinical Lead for Acute Medicine said: *“NHS 111 First will help people get the most appropriate care for their medical condition. Many people who come to ED don’t have emergency, life threatening conditions and could be treated elsewhere, often more quickly.*

“So whilst we still need people to ring 999 and come to ED during emergencies, we would ask those seeking non-emergency care to contact NHS 111 First. They will then receive the best care in a timely and more convenient way,” he added.

“This new way of working means we can cut the queues, over crowding and longer waits in ED and this will also help us reduce the risk of infection of things like Covid and flu,” said Dr Etheridge.