

# General Practice Prescribing Data

## Frequently Asked Questions

### About General Practice Prescribing Data

#### Why is the data being published?

The government has made a commitment to transparency in the public sector and has also expressed its vision for the use of GP practice level prescribing data to support its *Plan for Growth*.

For background information on the transparency agenda, see here:

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/services/transparency>

For background on practice level prescribing data, see here:

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/gpprescribingdata>

#### Where does the data come from?

NHS Prescription Services, part of the NHS Business Services Authority (BSA), is the provider of the data. GP practice level prescribing data is obtained from the BSA's prescribing and dispensing information systems.

#### What does the data cover?

The data covers prescriptions that are **prescribed in England** by GPs (general medical practitioners) and non-medical prescribers and that are **dispensed anywhere in the UK** in the community (for example at pharmacists). Therefore, prescriptions written in England but dispensed outside England are included.

The data includes prescriptions written by GPs and prescriptions written by non-medical prescribers who are attached to GP practices: nurses, pharmacists, optometrists, chiropodists and (potentially) radiographers.

The data does not cover private prescriptions.

General practice prescribing data is a list of all prescribed medicines, dressings and appliances that are dispensed each month. Only prescriptions that are subsequently

dispensed are included in the dataset – for example, if a patient does not take a prescription to the pharmacy for dispensing, then no information about that prescription is included in the dataset.

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

- The number of prescribed items that are dispensed
- The net ingredient cost
- The actual cost
- The quantity of tablets, capsules, liquid etcetera dispensed (Presentation level release only).

GP practices are identified only by their national code, so an additional data file (linked to the first by the practice code) provides the name and address of each practice.

Each presentation is identified by the BNF Code (see below). An additional data file (linked to the main data file by the BNF code) provides the chemical name for each presentation.

### **Does the data include prescriptions written by prescribers other than GPs, such as nurses?**

Yes, prescribing by any prescriber attached to a practice is included. The data includes non-medical prescribers who are attached to GP practices: nurses, pharmacists, optometrists, chiropodists and (potentially) radiographers.

Where prescribing cannot be linked to a practice the data is excluded. This amounts to approximately 0.2 per cent of dispensed items.

### **Are all practices included?**

All practices in England are included in this data where (in the relevant month) a prescription has been dispensed and submitted to NHS Prescription Services by the dispensing contractor as a claim for payment.

The practices included are all registered practices in England. Additionally, the data includes a number of 'dummy' practices, created by Area Teams to identify prescribing in certain environments or circumstances; these include specialist clinics, hospices, prisons, training units, etc.

Prescriptions issued from a branch surgery are included in the totals for the main practice site.

## Why are there a different number of practices in the dataset each month?

The number of GP practices can vary from month to month because:

- Practices may close and new practices may open from month to month.
- Practices may merge to form one larger practice or divide to form a number of smaller practices

## Is information available for individual prescribers?

No, practice prescribing data is being provided at the level of the GP practice, and includes prescribing for all GPs and other prescribers attached to that practice.

## How does practice prescribing data differ from other prescribing data published by the Health and Social Care Information Centre?

The data provided through this release has been available to GP practices for several years through the Electronic Prescribing & Financial Information for Practices (ePFIP) system provided by NHS Prescription Services.

From April 2013, the Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) has published Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) level prescribing data. Prior to April 2013, the HSCIC published PCT level prescribing data. National Prescribing data from the Prescription Cost Analysis (PCA) database is also published:

- **PCT level prescribing data** similarly includes prescribing by GPs and all non-medical prescribers attached to practices but the PCT prescribing data also includes prescribing which cannot be attributed to a specific practice. Note that the PCT prescribing data is at BNF section level.

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/iview/prescribing>

- **CCG level prescribing data** similarly includes prescribing by GPs and all non-medical prescribers attached to practices but the CCG prescribing data also includes prescribing which cannot be attributed to a CCG but is funded directly by an Area Team. Note that the CCG prescribing data is at BNF section level.

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/iview/prescribing>

- **PCA prescribing data** includes prescribing by GPs, all non-medical prescribers, dentists and all hospital prescriptions dispensed in the community where these prescriptions were dispensed in England (including prescriptions written in the three other UK countries). Prescriptions written in England but dispensed outside England are not included in PCA data. In contrast, practice level prescribing data includes all prescribing by GPs and non-medical prescribers in England, regardless of where the prescriptions were dispensed.

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/PCA>

## What data is available?

For the chemical level release, data is available for June 2010 to December 2012. No data from before June 2010 is available.

The final release of chemical level data was published in April 2013, covering data for December 2012.

For the presentation level release, files covering data for prescribing in August 2010 to current data releases are available. No data from before August 2010 is available.

Both Chemical and Presentation Level data can be found using the link below:

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/gpprescribingdata>

## Is practice prescribing data available by quarter or for a whole year?

Practice prescribing data is only available by month.

Similar prescribing data is available by quarter or by year, but at PCT or CCG and England level:

- Quarterly prescribing data at BNF section level can be found at:

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/iview/prescribing>

- The annual Prescription Cost Analysis data can be found at:

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/PCA>

## Accessing the Data

### Where is the data? / How do I access the data?

Practice level prescribing data can be accessed from here:

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/gpprescribingdata>

Practice prescribing data is held in a large single file in *comma-separated values* (CSV) format.

The files may be downloaded by right-clicking the appropriate links on the web page and using the *Save Target As* option to download the files to a local computer.

**Please note that the file is too large, and will not open fully (ie the data will be incomplete), in standard spreadsheet applications, eg Excel.**

Each monthly data set is large (over 4 million rows), but can be viewed in standard software such as Microsoft WordPad (save by right-clicking on the file name and

selecting 'Save Target As', or equivalent on Mac OSX). It is then possible to select the required rows of data and copy and paste the information into another software application, such as a spreadsheet.

Alternatively add-ons to existing software, such as the Microsoft PowerPivot add-on for Excel, to handle larger data sets, can be used. Further detail on how to load the data can be found on the publication pages for August 2014 data onwards.

The supplementary file(s) of practice and chemical substance details are smaller.

### **Can I extract the data for just one practice?**

For each month, there is a single data file, containing data for all available practices in England. It is not possible to download data for only one practice or for any subset of practices.

### **How do I find my practice?**

Each practice in the practice prescribing data file is identified by its national practice code. Practice details, including names and addresses, that relate to practice codes are available in supplementary files(s) from which practices can be identified.

### **Why are practice names not included in the main data file?**

It is important to identify practices in terms of their unique national codes. This allows the data to be linked to other datasets that use the same national practice codes, and avoids potential confusion over practices that have similar names.

Names and addresses of practices are held in a separate file to reduce the size of the prescription data file. Each practice has many rows in the prescription data file, and the use of practice codes means that it is not necessary to duplicate practice name and address information throughout the prescribing data file.

### **Where are the figures for GP practices in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?**

The practice level prescribing data currently being released from data held by NHS Prescription Services, part of the NHS Business Services Authority, covers only practices in England.

## **Understanding the Data**

### **What data items are in the Prescribing data (Chemical level) by GP Practice file?**

The CSV file of practice prescribing data contains the following data items:

- Strategic health authority (SHA) code (3 characters)
- Primary care trust (PCT) code (3 characters)
- Practice code (6 characters)

- British National Formulary (BNF) code (9 characters for chemical level medicines; 4 characters for appliances and dressings)
- Chemical name (40 characters)
- Total Items
- Total Net Ingredient Cost (£)
- Total Actual cost (£)
- Processing date (YYYYMM)

## What data items are in the Prescribing data (Presentation level) by GP Practice file?

The CSV file of presentation level prescribing data contains the following data items:

- Strategic health authority (SHA) code (3 characters)<sup>1</sup>
- Primary care trust (PCT) code (3 characters)<sup>2</sup>
- Practice code (6 characters)
- British National Formulary (BNF) code (15 characters)
- BNF name (truncated to 40 characters)
- Total Items
- Total Net Ingredient Cost (£)
- Total Actual cost (£)
- Quantity
- Processing date (YYYYMM)

Further details are given in the glossary which is available here:

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/gpprescribingdata>

## What is an Item?

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. While many prescriptions are for one month (28 or 30 days supply), items will be for varying length of treatment and quantity.

## What is the difference between Net Ingredient Cost and Actual cost?

The **Net Ingredient Cost** (NIC) is the basic price of a drug, i.e. the price listed in the Drug Tariff or price lists.

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<sup>1</sup> For data covering August 2010 to March 2013, the SHA field refers to Strategic Health Authority. Following changes to the NHS structure, from April 2013 onwards, the SHA field refers to Area Team.

<sup>2</sup> For data covering August 2010 to March 2013, the PCT field refers to Primary Care Trust. Following changes to the NHS structure, from April 2013 onwards, the PCT field refers to Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

**Actual Cost** is the estimated cost to the NHS, which is usually lower than Net Ingredient Cost. Actual Cost is calculated by subtracting the average percentage discount per item received by pharmacists (based on the previous month) from the Net Ingredient Cost, but adding in the value of a container allowance for each prescription item.

### **What is the British National Formulary (BNF)?**

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. In the BNF, medicines are classified by therapeutic group, for example: cardiovascular, respiratory, gastro-intestinal, etc

The NHS Prescription Services information system (the source of the practice level prescribing data) uses the therapeutic classifications defined in the BNF. NHS Prescription Services has created 'pseudo BNF chapters' for items not included in BNF chapters 1 to 15. The majority of such items are dressings and appliances, which have been classified into 'pseudo BNF chapters' (numbered 18 to 23). Note that there is no chapter 16 or 17. NHS Prescription Services has produced a booklet on BNF classifications and the pseudo classifications used, and this is available at:

[http://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/PrescriptionServices/Documents/PrescriptionServices/BNF\\_Classification\\_Booklet-2014.pdf](http://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/PrescriptionServices/Documents/PrescriptionServices/BNF_Classification_Booklet-2014.pdf)

### **What is 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 MLS
- Where the formulation is a solid form (eg. Cream, gel, ointment) the quantity will be the number of grammes.

## **Using the Data**

### **Can I link the practice code to any other practice information?**

Potentially the information can be linked to other data that uses the practice code as defined by the Organisation Data Service of the HSCIC

<http://systems.hscic.gov.uk/data/ods>

### **Are details for a particular type of dressing or appliance included?**

Information in the presentation level release lists individual types of dressings and appliances.



### **Are details for a particular brand of drug included?**

In the chemical level release medicines are grouped by chemical name (for example: amoxicillin, simvastatin, paracetamol). The chemical name covers all formulations and presentations of a drug, both branded and generic versions.

In the presentation level release details for particular brands of drug are available.

### **Can I have the data for a class of drugs, for example I want to know about all the statins?**

In this example, information on all statins can be obtained by grouping the individual statins medicines.

NHS Prescription Services has produced a booklet on BNF classifications and the pseudo classifications used, and this is available at:

[http://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/PrescriptionServices/Documents/PrescriptionServices/BNF\\_Classification\\_Booklet-2014.pdf](http://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/PrescriptionServices/Documents/PrescriptionServices/BNF_Classification_Booklet-2014.pdf)

### **How do I find out if a GP practice is a good prescriber? How do I compare my GP practice with other local GP practices?**

Practice prescribing data requires careful interpretation, and this information should not be looked at in isolation. This information should not be used to make judgements on the quality of prescribing, as a broad range of factors influence the clinical need for a medicine and decisions about which medicine is the most appropriate choice for an individual patient.

Comparisons between GP practices requires further information about prescribing, list sizes, age and sex of patients on the list, knowledge about the medicines, and why they are prescribed.

### **I am prescribed a drug for a rare condition; can I be identified in this dataset?**

All practice level information down to presentation level is being released, but no information about patients is contained in the data. It is not possible to identify individual patients in the data.

In line with the recent High Court ruling on the release of abortion statistics, data can be released unless an individual can be identified from the data or from other data that is already in the public domain. The release of practice level prescribing data does not enable the identification of individual patients.

If you are the only patient receiving a certain drug in your practice then the number of items prescribed and their cost for that medicine will be in this dataset but it will not show which patient received it. Note that information about the price of drugs is already available in the public domain.



## **How do I find out how many people with a particular condition, such as depression, have been given prescriptions?**

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.

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.

## **Can I have the information broken down by age and sex of patients receiving prescriptions?**

This is not possible. No information is collected on the number of patients or the characteristics of patients who receive prescriptions.

## **Can I work out a prescribing rate – what percentage of patients receive prescriptions?**

The number of patients registered with a practice is available on the BSA website under Common Information Requests (then under Quarterly Patient List Size and GP Count for each Practice) at:

<http://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/PrescriptionServices/3198.aspx>

However it is important to note that practice level prescribing data does not reveal how many individual patients actually received a prescription; some registered patients may have received no prescriptions at all.

## **How do I find out which pharmacies dispensed these prescriptions?**

Information on dispensers, such as pharmacies, is not available from this dataset.

## **Can I find out about private prescriptions given to patients by GPs?**

Private prescriptions are not included in this dataset.

## **Can I find out what proportion of prescriptions were paid for by patients, or exempt from payment?**

This information is not available from this dataset. All prescriptions are included, whether supplied free to patients or charged.

## **Can I comment on this data release?**

If you wish to comment on this data, please write to [enquiries@hscic.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@hscic.gov.uk)

## **Where can I find further prescribing data?**

Further prescribing data released by the HSCIC is available from:

<http://www.hscic.gov.uk/prescribing>

Data provided by the NHS BSA can be found at:

<http://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/prescriptionservices.aspx>