

Requesting Specialist Referrals

Referrals to Medical Specialists

In Australia we use a referral system to communicate and coordinate private patient health care between primary care doctors such as General Practitioners and private medical specialists. Although we highly recommend seeing your primary care doctor routinely and arranging an appropriate specialist referral, you don't legally need a referral to privately see a medical specialist. For example, if you wanted to see a surgeon about a procedure, you may just find one on the internet and make an appointment. However, some specialists may refuse to make an appointment without the referral, and this is because they may not be able to assess the type or urgency of the medical issues involved. Furthermore, only an appropriate referral letter allows you to access your Medicare rebate for the specialist consultation or for any associated procedures.

What is a Referral?

A referral is a written, signed and dated request from your GP to a specialist to assist with the care of your medical problem.

In the referral letter, your GP would usually explain the problem, what they would like the specialist to do, provide a list of medications, allergies, previous medical problems, and a copy of relevant investigations that may have been done. This is done face to face in a consultation to avoid miscommunication and any privacy concerns. There is a professional expectation and Medicare requirement that the specialist replies to the GP letter, so your healthcare maybe better coordinated.

What is a referral for?

A referral is for a single course of treatment of a specific problem. If a new problem arises then a new referral is needed. Therefore, if you see an Orthopaedic Surgeon to manage your broken arm you will need a new referral to deal with your hip replacement.

The specialist can bill more for a first visit than for subsequent visits. Unless a new problem arises, which requires a new referral, you are unlikely to be billed for a new visit after that.

Who does referrals?

GP's can refer to all specialists.

A specialist can refer to any other specialist but these referrals only last 3 months. For example, a Paediatrician may refer to a Paediatric Neurologist to help with management of problematic epilepsy. For ongoing care after those 3 months, or for prolonged appointment wait times a longer lasting GP referral is often needed.

How long does a referral last?

A standard referral lasts for 12 months. This starts when you first see the specialist, not from the date the referral was written. This makes sense as you are unlikely to see a specialist on the same day as seeing the GP.

Referrals can be made for an indefinite period, and this is useful for conditions that are unlikely to go away. For example, you could be referred to an Endocrinologist for help with managing your diabetes indefinitely. However, as specialists are independent, they are able to decline referrals expressed in this manner.

Backdating Referrals

As a referral is a legal document, it is **illegal** to backdate a referral, Medicare does not permit this. A specialist can see a patient without a valid referral only in an emergency. If for example your dog ate your referral, or another good reason, there is an exemption available for you to claim your rebate if the specialist notes that the "Referral is lost".

If you need a referral, please make sure you get it **before** seeing the specialist or reconfirm the need for a referral from the specialist's reception team.

Asking your GP for a backdated referral is like asking the specialist to forward date your consultation to get your rebate. Both scenarios are not permitted under Medicare law.