



# HEALTH CARE FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

# HEALTH CARE FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS DURING THE FIRST 36 MONTHS OF THEIR ASYLUM PROCEDURE / BEFORE THEY ARE ACCEPTED

## INTRODUCTION

In Germany, medical care is organised in a way that is different from many other countries of the world. This flyer is a collection of important information that will help you orient yourself more easily when you are ill.

## ENTITLEMENTS

In Saxony, asylum seekers always need a treatment voucher („Behandlungsschein“) during the first 36 months of an ongoing asylum procedure. Depending on your accommodation, you can receive such a treatment voucher at the reception centre (from the State Head Office at Chemnitz) or at the Social Welfare Office („Sozialamt“) or District Office („Landratsamt“) that is in charge of your place of residence. One treatment voucher per contacted doctor is needed.

You are entitled to health services in a limited sense, i.e. you have the right to be treated in the case of acute illnesses and pains and in medical cases of emergency (in other words, in very urgent cases of illness, e.g. acute shortness of breath, severe pain in the chest, severe stomachache, acute dizziness, complications during pregnancy). Also chronic diseases which would become worse quickly without treatment (e.g. diabetes, high blood pressure, epilepsy) can be treated without a treatment guarantee („Kostenzusage“). Please note: Medical problems that you have already had for some days or weeks and that do not suddenly become worse dramatically are not emergencies!

TIP: In urgent cases, the treatment voucher can also be handed in on the next working day, but the doctor always needs your full personal details. For every treatment, please bring along a slip on which the following is listed (written in block letters in Latin script):

- your first name,
- your surname,
- your date of birth,
- your native language and other languages that you know.

If it is not clear whether a treatment is possible under the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act („Asylbewerberleistungsgesetz“), this must be checked BEFORE you see the doctor. Please ask about this at your accommodation or at the Social Welfare Office. In such cases, you need a treatment guarantee. For such a guarantee, it is normally necessary to consult a general practitioner („Hausarzt“).

## **LIFE-THREATENING EMERGENCIES**

In Germany, when a patient is unconscious, has severe shortness of breath or is in another life-threatening situation, an emergency doctor („Notarzt“) is called. The emergency doctor may only be called in very severe cases. The emergency doctor will then take the patient to hospital. He can be called on the telephone by dialling 112. A person who calls 112 should speak at least enough German or English to make the person at the emergency call centre understand what kind of emergency is concerned. In any case, also contact the Medpoint (if you live at a reception centre) or the social workers (if you live in communal accommodation).

## **ACUTE ILLNESSES AND PAINS DURING THE DAY**

In Germany, illnesses which are not immediately life-threatening are NOT treated in hospitals but at doctors' surgeries. From Monday till Friday between 8 a.m. and (usually) 6 p.m., you can present yourself at doctors' surgeries with a treatment voucher; however, you should always ask for the exact visiting times of a surgery, or look them up on the Internet, beforehand.

In Germany, the first doctor to see is always a general practitioner („Hausarzt“), who is either a specialist in general medicine or an internist practising as a general practitioner. That general practitioner will then send you to other specialists if necessary. In order to see further specialists, you must obtain a new treatment voucher from the asylum seekers' benefits office („Leistungsbehörde“) and bring along a letter of referral from the general practitioner.

Only in the case of gynaecological disorders or problems during pregnancy, women can go directly to a gynaecologist („Frauenarzt“ or „Gynäkologe“) without seeing a general practitioner first. A treatment voucher is also needed in those cases.

You should always try to go to the doctor's at daytime and take an interpreter with you in any case. If the doctor does not understand you, no treatment will be possible. In Germany, a doctor can be sued if he treats you although he has not understood you or could not inform you about the treatment. So if you go to a doctor's surgery without an interpreter, it can happen that you will not be treated. Life-threatening emergencies are an exception.

## **ACUTE ILLNESSES AND PAINS OUTSIDE THE VISITING HOURS**

If you have an acute, but not life-threatening illness at a time between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. or on a weekend, two possibilities to get help exist in Germany:

- Illnesses that are not life-threatening, e.g. fever, headache, backache, cold, earache, stomachache, joint pain etc., are treated by an emergency service with doctors' surgeries that are on call. It can be contacted by telephone from anywhere on 116 117 (the person who calls must speak either German or English). During the telephone conversation, you will be told what doctor is in charge (paediatrician, general practitioner, eye specialist etc.) and you will be given the address of such a doctor, where you can present yourself.
- In Germany, you go to the nearest hospital only in the case of severe illnesses (e.g. major injuries that need to be stitched or X-rayed, severe diarrhoea or vomiting, pain in the area of the heart etc.). At the emergency department of the hospital, it will be decided whether you can be treated as an outpatient or will have to stay in hospital.

If you are in doubt, you can ask your social worker who to contact.

In cases of emergency, it is particularly important for you to come with an interpreter if you speak neither German nor English yourself.

## WHAT ARE YOU ENTITLED TO AS AN ASYLUM SEEKER?

**During the first 15 months of an ongoing asylum procedure, you are not insured by a German health insurance institution** but have restricted entitlements to benefits, which are governed by the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act („Asylbewerberleistungsgesetz“). Below, we have listed some important points for you:

### 1. Pregnant women

Pregnant women are entitled to comprehensive medical care before and during their pregnancy, which is provided by a gynaecologist („Frauenarzt“ or „Gynäkologe“). As a rule, the reception centres also offer midwives' consultation hours. A treatment guarantee is not necessary for this kind of medical care. The pregnant woman may present herself at the gynaecologist's with a treatment voucher, but she has to make an appointment. The gynaecologist may be a man or a woman; please inform yourself beforehand and make your choice. At the gynaecologist's, you will receive your pregnancy record book, in which the course of the pregnancy and all necessary examinations will be documented. During your pregnancy, you should always have that pregnancy record book with you and present it if necessary.

### 2. Contraception

In Germany, people must pay birth control pills, the morning-after pill and also most abortions themselves. To asylum seekers, exceptional regulations pursuant to the Pregnancy Conflict Act („Schwangerschaftskonfliktgesetz“) apply. Please contact any of the appropriate consulting centres as soon as possible.

In addition, condoms are distributed at many reception centres.

### 3. Children

Children are treated comprehensively for all illnesses. It is possible for them to have regular screenings – e.g. for development delays – and vaccinations.

#### 4. Medicine

In Germany, prescriptions are only given for important medicine in cases of severe illness. German doctors must not prescribe any medicine if an illness can also be cured without pills. This applies to Germans and asylum seekers alike. For example, cold medicine for adults, vitamins and dietary supplements are not prescribed in Germany. You will have to pay for such medicine yourself (like German patients have to). However, headache pills, fever-reducing medicine, nose spray etc. cost less than 10 EUR as a rule.

#### 5. Vaccinations

You are entitled to all vaccinations according to the recommendations of the Permanent Vaccination Commission (STIKO). You can ask for them right at the initial medical examination, but you can also have the vaccinations later at your reception centre or a resident doctor's surgery. Please bring your vaccination card along if you have one.

#### 6. Spectacles

In Germany, patients must pay for their spectacles themselves, except in some very rare cases (e.g. extreme short- or long-sightedness) – that also applies to asylum seekers. But there are opticians' shops that sell spectacles at very low prices. Just go there and ask for advice! Spectacles for normal presbyopia (i.e. usual reading spectacles) are available at all supermarkets and chemists' shops for less than 10 EUR.

Visually impaired school-aged children can receive spectacles on prescription after being examined by an eye specialist.

#### 7. Hearing aids

Hearing aids can only be prescribed if a treatment guarantee has been given. As a rule, such a treatment guarantee is not given in the case of normal age-related hearing loss because that benefit is not included in the scope of benefits under the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act. Such aids have to be paid by the patients themselves. As their prices vary considerably (prices of good

hearing aids start from as little as 600 to 700 €), you should seek advice from a hearing aid acoustician.

Severely hearing-impaired school-aged children can receive a hearing aid on prescription after being examined by an ear, nose and throat specialist.

#### 8. Massages

Massages, baths and thermotherapies are NOT included in the scope of benefits under the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act as interpreted by the Saxon authorities. This means that you will have to pay for such services yourself.

#### 9. Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy is included in the scope of benefits under the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act, as interpreted by the Saxon authorities, if it takes place immediately after an operation or other hospital stay in order to complete the inpatient treatment of the acute illness. In addition, a treatment guarantee must always be obtained.

#### 10. Screening

Screening for cancer or for cardiovascular and metabolic diseases will also be possible only after a positive decision on your asylum application has been made, or after 15 months in Germany. Only after that, you will be insured by a German health insurance institution.

#### 11. Fertility treatment such as test-tube fertilisation

Fertility treatment (including the diagnoses that are necessary beforehand) is NOT included in the scope of benefits under the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act. You will have to pay for such a treatment privately, regardless if it is a hormone treatment or a test-tube fertilisation. Only after your asylum application has been accepted, or after 15 months in Germany, you can apply for the bearing of the costs by the health insurance institution.

## HOW DO YOU GET TO THE DOCTOR'S?

In Germany, every patient must take care of his own transport to the doctor's surgery, unless he has severe difficulty walking. As this is far more difficult for you (because you do not know your way around yet), here are some useful tips:

- Ask at your accommodation if anyone can accompany you or if a shuttle service is available at certain times. If so, please make sure that you do not miss the shuttle bus. Be on time!!!
- Learn as quickly as possible how to use trams, buses and the underground in Germany. You will need a ticket, which must be punched after it has been bought. Please ask someone at your place of residence to show you how it is done. Taxis, however, are very expensive, and you will have to pay for them yourself.
- In big cities, there are many doctor's surgeries so that you will be able to reach many of them on foot. Please ask someone to show you the nearest doctor's surgery that you can go to on the city map.

## DOCTORS IN GERMANY

There are some things that are typical in Germany:

1. In Saxony, over 60% of all doctors are women.
2. In Germany, there is full equality of men and women.
3. In cases of emergency, you cannot choose if you want to be treated by a man or by a woman.
4. Among the gynaecologists, the percentage of female doctors is very high. It should be no problem for asylum seekers to find a female gynaecologist nearby.
5. Usually, the doctor will shake hands with you when he/she meets you – no matter if the doctor is a man or a woman.
6. In Germany, a doctor's assistant (most of which are female) is usually present at the examination room. If you do not agree to that, you can ask for the protection of your privacy at any time. The rules of each doctor's surgery should be respected.



7. In Germany, a woman can, of course, bring her husband along to a medical examination. But it can happen that the doctor asks the female patient again to make sure she agrees that her husband is present (which she has to). Gynaecological examinations, however, do not take place in the presence of the husband or any other male accompanying person. The male accompanying person usually has to leave the examination room. Exceptions are made for ultrasound scans of pregnant women. Such examinations are often made in the presence of the partner.
8. The German word for treatment, „Behandlung“, literally means „handling“ – which shows that German doctors will use their hands to examine you. All doctors, men and women, have to do this with male and female patients. This is another thing that you will have to get accustomed to in Germany.
9. Often, the work clothing of a German doctor is no different from usual leisurewear. Doctors hardly ever work in a white coat. Some outpatient clinics use special work clothes. As a result, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish doctors from other staff members.
10. In Germany, special attention is paid to punctuality. Therefore, doctors' appointments should be kept in any case. In Germany, „at 3 p.m.“ means that you really have to be there at 3 p.m. and not a quarter of an hour later. In the most unfavourable case, you will be sent back home because you have missed your appointment, which would be very annoying.
11. In Germany, doctors' surgeries and emergency departments are overcrowded as a rule. At night, the staff is often not only in charge of the emergency department but also of the operating theatre. This may sometimes result in considerable waiting times, especially since the examination of urgent and severe illnesses must have priority. If you have waited for more than one hour, you can ask a member of the staff politely if you have been forgotten. Sometimes, however, waiting times of two or more hours are indeed possible. So please stay patient.
12. Some illnesses make it necessary to take a blood sample. As little blood as possible is taken in any case, but it may be several small tubes.

13. It is possible that the doctor suggests different forms of treatment to you and talks with you about which treatment is best for you. This may be a little unusual for you, but this is the normal procedure in Germany, with doctors trying to include the patients in the treatment as early as possible.
14. In Germany, doctors work under high time pressure. As a rule, they have about seven minutes to treat one patient. That is why, unfortunately, long, personal conversations often do not take place. Most doctors ask specific questions about discomfort, examine the patient and finally give him a diagnosis and therapy. Doctors as well as patients in Germany are often dissatisfied with that situation, but since, also in Germany, the number of doctors decreases while the number of patients increases, the situation will, unfortunately, not change. We hope that you understand this.
15. Respect is always mutual, so please treat the staff and the doctor with respect even in difficult situations.

## HOSPITALS IN GERMANY

At German hospitals, there are special rules too.

1. The patient is most important at the hospital, but there is a certain daily routine at the wards and functional areas, which must be observed. Punctuality is important here as well, but waiting times (even long ones) are always possible because emergencies are ALWAYS treated with priority. And it is the doctors who decide which cases are emergencies.
2. Most hospitals have visiting times that must be observed. Please ask the nursing staff for the times at which your family members are allowed to visit you.
3. In any case, quietness must always be observed at a hospital in order to protect the patients. Both you and your visitors must pay attention to this – not only when talking to each other but also when making telephone calls or watching television.

4. Having more than 2 visitors at a time should always be the exception rather than the rule, and having more than three visitors is not possible! If the nursing staff sends visitors away, that instruction must be followed without contradicting. In consideration of the other patients, if your health permits it, you should also use the common rooms of your ward or the hospital for receiving visitors.
5. The staff of German hospitals works under high pressure. It is a sign of mutual respect if you do not cause any unnecessary work. This concerns, for example, your behaviour in the toilets and bathrooms, waste prevention and disposal, personal hygiene, the tidiness in the rooms and on the wards, and much more.
6. In Germany, ONE family member can stay at the hospital overnight in exceptional cases. This is only the case if:
  - a) one parent is admitted together with small children,
  - b) a family member is dying.
 Whether such a stay is possible must be discussed with the treating doctor in any case.
7. If a child of the family is ill and is admitted to hospital as an inpatient, this does not mean that the other children of the family are also admitted to hospital. Only children who are ill and need to be treated in hospital as an inpatient will be admitted. The decision will be made by the admitting doctor or the doctor at the hospital's outpatient clinic.
8. If you leave your ward as a patient, you must let the nursing staff know.
9. Patients must not leave the hospital without a doctor's consent. So you will have to inform the staff of your ward whenever you wish to leave the hospital so that a doctor's consent can be obtained.
10. At German hospitals, patients are supplied with food, drinks, bedding and much more. All items remain property of the hospital and must NOT be taken away.

We hope that this information will help you orient yourself in Germany. We know that this is not really easy and wish you good luck with it whole-heartedly.

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