

The move to ESA - factsheet 4: medical assessment

The process:

Most people are asked to attend a medical assessment as well as completing the ESA50 form. Being asked to attend one doesn't mean they haven't accepted what you've said on the form - it's just the next step in the process for the vast majority of people.

The medical assessments are arranged by Atos - a multinational company contracted to carry them out by the DWP. In their communications with you they will usually simply call themselves 'Medical Services'.

They will usually try to arrange a time and date for the assessment over the phone with you but otherwise will send you an appointment by post.

You can take someone with you who will be allowed to come into the assessment with you. This could be a professional who supports you - e.g. a Support Worker, Social Worker, CPN, someone from a local Mind group, a Counsellor etc. or they could be a friend or family member.

If you will need someone to go with you then explain to Medical Services that you will also need to agree the appointment with them - or you could give them permission to contact the person involved directly.

Scary as I know the prospect of it probably is, not turning up to the medical can stop your benefit being paid, so if for any reason you can't attend, it's *really* important to let them know why.

Being assessed at home

If it's impossible for you to go to an assessment because of your health then you can ask for a home assessment. I know this wouldn't be an easier prospect to cope with for some people, but for others it may feel ok. The DWP will usually demand confirmation of your difficulties from a worker involved in your support - read on for suggestions on who to ask for this.



I just can't face it...

If you know that the assessment will be impossible for you to cope with, then it's vital that you try to get someone else to support you in conveying this to the DWP. They won't just take your word for it.

Ideally they would want this verified by someone medical - e.g. a GP or Psychiatrist, or a psychiatric nurse at the very least. If you see a counsellor through the NHS then they may well also be psychiatric nurses and may be able to help.

However if you don't have this 'medical' backup it may also be worth a non-medical person involved in your support trying - or acting on your behalf to try to access medical support - e.g. could your Housing Support Worker or benefits advisor get in contact with your GP or Psychiatrist for you?

Talk to these people about your fears *now* - don't wait for the process to start - so that hopefully you can agree a plan of action for when you need their help.

They can either contact the DWP and Atos for you by telephone or they can provide a letter explaining why your attending would be impossible which you need to send to both the DWP and the Medical Services.

If they are also able to include supporting information relating to either the Support Component criteria or the points system on factsheet 3 then they may not require any more from you.

Sometimes the difficulties which make it impossible for you to attend medical assessment also make it impossible for you to get support with your mental health. Not everyone who needs support gets it - and some people who provide support are more willing to get involved with benefits matters than others.

If you know you can't attend *and* don't have anyone who could provide you with supporting evidence, then you could try getting in touch with the DWP and medical services yourself trying to explain why both:

- ⇒ You cannot attend and
- ⇒ You can't get evidence supporting this

Doing this would be much better than not turning up at all.

If in spite of this the DWP are insistent that they want you to be assessed, then as a last resort you could try contacting your MP's local office and explaining your dilemma to them. How much they will do for you will vary from office to office - but at the very least it would make your MP aware that there are people who are really struggling with ESA...

medical assessment - continued

Who does the assessment?

Atos employs doctors, nurses, occupational therapists and physiotherapists. I *assume* that they don't usually use physiotherapists to carry out mental health assessments, but in theory everyone they employ will have been trained to be an 'approved disability analyst'.

What does it involve?

The person carrying out the assessment will often come to the waiting area to call you in. They do this quite routinely so that they can observe people who have physical problems rising and walking.

In the room as well as a desk with a computer and chairs there will usually be an examination couch but unless you also have physical problems, they won't want to 'examine' you physically.

The assessment will have begun from the moment they identified who you are. Remember that as well as asking you questions they will be noticing your

- ⇒ clothes and whether you look 'clean and tidy'
- ⇒ eye contact
- ⇒ body language
- ⇒ whether you are sweating, shaking, breathing rapidly, speaking hesitantly or tearful

Don't feel you have to 'hold it together' during the assessment - it's much better for you to actually let the person interviewing you see your emotions.

What's the computer for?

Atos Medical Services use software which guides the assessor through the questions they need to consider, offering them drop-down menus of pre-written statements to choose from in justifying their assessment. This subsequently forms the report which is sent back to the DWP. The assessor can also write their own personalised comments, but as this takes longer they often don't.



What will I be asked?

The assessors will often start off by asking you to describe a typical day for them.

It's important to try to explain how you're limited by your mental health - e.g. instead of saying 'I get up and then watch TV' it might be more accurate to say 'I lie in bed as long as I can - sometimes I can make some of the day pass by going back to sleep - eventually though there's so much going through my head that getting up's the only option.

'I light a cigarette as soon as I'm out of bed and go use the toilet. I don't wash - I can go for days without doing so - and usually won't dress unless I have to go out. It just feels like too much. I'll put the TV on for the noise but I don't listen to it - my mind's usually racing - full of worries...' and so on.

If you feel concerned that you might not be able to tell the assessor everything - or that they may not listen - you could write about a typical day before attending and use it either to remind yourself to say things - or just give it to them on the day.

Although they will not usually ask you directly, what they're trying to 'decide' from your conversation is whether you have the difficulties listed within the points system for ESA. Try to look over these beforehand and also re-read what you said on your ESA50 form.

The assessor should be polite and non challenging and allow you space to answer their questions.

After the assessment

I know you're probably just glad it's over, but once you're out of there try - as soon as you can - to note down how long the assessment took, roughly what was asked and said and how it 'felt' - did you feel that you were being rushed or that the assessor was listening properly? Also make a note of anything the assessor said that surprised, upset or even just puzzled you.

Talk it through with anyone who came with you for company too - what sort of vibes did they pick up on?

Having this sort of information is sometimes really useful if they end up making a bad decision and much harder to remember some weeks down the line.

The assessor's report will be sent to a DWP decision maker who will go on to decide whether you can get ESA. In doing this, they should weigh up *all* the evidence - the report, your ESA50 and any supporting information you sent, but often give too much weight to the medical report.