



Additional 10 MBS mental health sessions during COVID-19

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Consumers

The Australian Government recognises the mental health impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on individuals and communities across Australia.

The expansion of the Better Access Pandemic Support measure ensures Australians whose mental health is impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic can access an additional 10 Medicare subsidised psychological therapy sessions. This measure extends existing support provided through the Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medical Benefits Schedule (Better Access) initiative. It entitles eligible people nationally to access up to 20 Medicare subsidised individual support sessions and 10 group support sessions each calendar year. These additional sessions are available from 9 October 2020 until 31 December 2022.

Who is eligible to access the 10 additional sessions?

The additional sessions are available to people who have:

- a Mental Health Treatment Plan;
- used all 10 individual Better Access sessions in the calendar year that they seek a referral; and
- a referral from their GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician (patients do not require a referral if their GP delivers the psychological therapy).

How do I access these sessions?

The Australian Government has designed the process for accessing these sessions to be flexible and consistent with the existing referral process for Better Access.

You will need to see your GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician (reviewing practitioner). Your practitioner can review your Mental Health Treatment Plan or use another consultation item to refer you for the additional sessions.

Your practitioner will decide how many sessions you can receive in your referral. You are able to access up to 10 additional sessions each calendar year from 9 October 2020 until 31 December 2022. This is a total of up to 20 individual sessions each calendar year.

The maximum number of sessions your reviewing practitioner can state on your referral is:

- 10 additional Better Access sessions or
- 6 initial Better Access sessions.

What happens if I don't use all 10 additional sessions before the calendar year ends?

The quota for your number of Better Access sessions resets each calendar year. The maximum number of sessions you can receive in a calendar year is 20 sessions.

To support access, you can continue to use your referral for the additional sessions to access unused services in the next calendar year. For example, if your GP provides you with a referral for 10 additional sessions in 2020, and you only use 6 sessions before 31 December 2020, you can continue to use to access the remaining 4 sessions in 2021, before needing a new referral.

Once you have used all of the additional sessions stated on your referral, you will need to visit your reviewing practitioner. They will decide whether to refer you for initial Better Access sessions in the new calendar year. You can access a maximum of 6 sessions in an initial Better Access sessions referral.

What happens if I haven't used up all my additional 10 sessions before 31 December 2022?

The additional Better Access sessions are temporary and cannot be accessed after 31 December 2022.

Can I access additional group sessions?

No, this new measure is for individual psychological services only.

Can I receive sessions via telehealth?

Yes. More information on telehealth is available [here](#).

The appropriateness of telehealth services is a clinical judgement the health professional will make in consultation with the patient.

There is no change to the rules that apply to telehealth items for Modified Monash Model areas 4 to 7 for people living in rural or remote areas.

What if I have already received a referral for the additional 10 sessions from my medical practitioner through the Better Access initiative for people living under public health orders? Am I entitled to another 10 sessions under this expansion of that measure?

No, the maximum number of individual psychological support sessions you can access in a calendar year is 20.

The changes to the Better Access Pandemic Support measure simply expand access to the additional 10 psychological support services to all eligible Australians nationally. The measure also increases the timeframe for which these services are available. If you have already accessed an additional 10 sessions under the original Better Access Pandemic Support Measure, you will not be eligible for more until next calendar year.

Do I need a new Mental Health Treatment Plan to access the additional 10 sessions?

No, you do not need a new Mental Health Treatment Plan to access the additional 10 sessions but you do need an existing Mental Health Treatment Plan. If you already have a Mental Health Treatment Plan, see the section above entitled 'How do I access these sessions?' for further information.

What if I don't have a Mental Health Treatment Plan?

If you don't have an existing Mental Health Treatment Plan then you will be unable to access any sessions. You will need to discuss this with your medical practitioner (GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician). Your medical practitioner can determine if you need a Mental Health Treatment Plan.

What services are available *without* a Mental Health Treatment Plan?

A range of other mental health services and supports are available during the pandemic which do not require you having a Mental Health Treatment Plan.

Beyond Blue established a 24/7 phone counselling service (1800 512 348). This service is staffed by trained counsellors to help people experiencing stress or anxiety associated with the impacts of the pandemic. This may include concerns about health, employment changes, business closures or family pressures. You can find further information about the Beyond Blue Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service by visiting coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au or calling the phone counselling service line.

You may also like to consider using digital services. You can use digital services to complement, or as an alternative to, face-to-face therapies. They allow you to seek support in times of need, when and where it's most convenient. The Government's digital mental health gateway, Head to Health, is a consumer-friendly website that aims to help

people more easily access information. Head to Health provides advice and free or low cost phone and online counselling, treatment and crisis support. Head to Health is available at headtohealth.gov.au.

How does this measure relate to the Better Access Bushfire items?

This new measure is separate from the Better Access Bushfire Recovery items. You can access both the bushfire items and these new items if you are eligible, noting that each has its own separate eligibility requirements.

How do the COVID-19 *Better Access Pandemic Support* items differ from the Better Access Bushfire Recovery items?

The Better Access Bushfire Recovery items were put in place to support bushfire affected individuals and families and emergency response personnel. To ensure quick access to these services, individuals do not need to have a diagnosed mental health condition, GP referral or mental health treatment plan. The bushfire items cannot be accessed after 30 June 2022.

The COVID-19 Better Access items are different. These services are intended to support people with a diagnosed mental illness who need additional treatment and support.

Why have mental health nurses and counsellors not been given access to these new MBS items?

Provider eligibility for this measure aligns with current arrangements under the existing Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the MBS initiative.