

Retention of health records

Doctors often query how long medical records should be retained. To help you we have summarised the main points for GP and hospital records in the tables below.

The recommendations apply irrespective of the form in which records are held. Record holders are under a legal and ethical obligation to maintain records safely and securely.

Although the guidance refers to minimum periods for which records must be retained, there may be occasions when records need to be kept for longer. It is important to bear in mind that the fifth principle of the Data Protection Act 1998 prohibits the retention of personal data for longer than is necessary.

Although the definition of 'necessary' will vary, where a decision is made to retain records for longer than the periods given below, it is important that this is supported by explicit reasons, which should ordinarily be recorded in the records.

Although these retention periods are laid down by the health departments in the devolved nations, private practitioners are unlikely to be criticised if they keep records for these periods.

Recommended minimum lengths of retention of GP records

For England, Wales, and Northern Ireland

Our tables quote the advice given in Department of Health (2006) Records management: NHS code of practice.

Similar advice is provided in the schedules relevant to each of the devolved nations, however, you should refer directly to the relevant schedule for more detailed advice specific to each nation.

Type of record	Retention period
Maternity records	25 years after the birth of the last child
GP records	GP Records retain for 10 years after death or after the patient has permanently left the country unless the patient remains in the European Union. In the case of a child if the illness or death could have potential relevance to adult conditions or have genetic implications for the family of the deceased, the advice of clinicians should be sought as to whether to retain the records for a longer period. Electronic patient records (EPRs) must not be destroyed, or deleted, for the foreseeable future.
Records relating to persons receiving treatment for a mental disorder within the meaning of mental health legislation	20 years after the date of the last contact; or 10 years after the patient's death if sooner
Records relating to those serving in HM Armed Forces	Not to be destroyed
Records relating to those serving a prison sentence	Not to be destroyed

Recommended minimum lengths of retention of hospital records

For England, Wales, and Northern Ireland

Type of record	Retention period
Maternity records (including all obstetric and midwifery records, including those of episodes of maternity care that end in stillbirth or where the child later dies)	25 years after the birth of the last child
Children and young people	Retain until the patient's 25th birthday or 26th if young person was 17 at conclusion of treatment, or 8 years after death
Mentally disordered persons within the meaning of any Mental Health Act	20 years after the date of last contact between the patient or client or service user and any health or care professional employed by the mental health provider, or 8 years after the death of the patient or client or service user if sooner
All other hospital records (other than non-specified secondary care records)	8 years after the conclusion of treatment or death

Summary of minimum retention periods for personal health records

Scotland

Type of record	Retention period
Adult	6 years after last entry, or 3 years after the patient's death
Records relating to children and young people (16 years on admission)	Until the patient's 25th birthday, or 26th if an entry was made when the young person was 17; or 3 years after death of the patient if sooner
Mentally disordered persons within the meaning of any Mental Health Act	20 years after date of last contact between the patient or client or service user and any health or care professional employed by the mental health provider, or 3 years after the death of the patient or client or service user if sooner and the patient died while in the care of the organisation
GP records	For the patient's lifetime and 3 years after the patient's death Electronic Patient Records (EPRs) - GP only - must not be destroyed, or deleted, for the foreseeable future
Maternity records	25 years after the birth of the last child

Department of Health for England and the devolved nations' detailed advice about the retention of health records:

- [Department of Health's record retention schedule](#) (see Part 2 (second edition) Annex D1)
- [Scottish Executive Health Department records retention schedule](#) (see Annex D, Part 3)
- [Welsh Assembly Government guidance on managing records in NHS Trusts and Health Authorities](#)
- [Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety \(Northern Ireland\) Good management, good records - health acute and community](#)