# **‘My GP suggested it’: Britons explain why they went private for surgery**

As it emerges that private hospitals are treating a record number of people, patients tell their stories

Private hospitals are caring for a record number of patients paying through their own savings or private medical insurance, according to [figures](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/mar/08/private-healthcare-could-become-a-new-normal-as-nhs-grows-weaker) from the Private Healthcare Information Network. Here, three patients explain why they recently had to turn to the private sector for an operation.

## **‘It was taking over life – but I resent having to pay’**

Since the pandemic, Alan Gregory, 62, had been having worsening problems caused by an enlarged prostate. In the past year, it began to seriously affect his quality of life: he needed to self-catheterise daily and was suffering a urinary tract infection every couple of months. “It had really reached the point where it was taking over my life,” he said. “During UTIs, I was passing significant amounts of blood – it was distressing.”

Following an [NHS](https://www.theguardian.com/society/nhs) referral, he was told in October 2023 that the waiting time for Holep surgery was 18 months. “At first I just accepted it – then one or two weeks after, I had another infection and just decided I really couldn’t go on having that. The only way to have it done quicker was to pay,” said Gregory, a recently retired NHS project manager in Norwich.

After arranging a private appointment with a consultant in December 2023, he had the surgery in February, at a cost of just under £8,000. He felt angry at being pushed towards private healthcare by long waits. “I resent being put in a position by Tory failures to have to pay,” he said, adding that he was aware that he was fortunate to be able to afford it. “Most people can’t, and just have to wait 18 months on a list.

“The reason for the wait is underfunding by the government. I am in no way critical of the amazing people working in the NHS and providing first-class healthcare despite these challenges. We’re all suffering as a result of austerity.”

However, he added that the treatment was “absolutely worth” the money he spent on it. “The treatment has already been life-changing. I now feel the future is positive, rather than worrying about how that side of my health will decline.”

## **‘You don’t want the risk of sepsis again’**

After developing a fever in September 2022, Paul Wilson, 80, was admitted to hospital with biliary sepsis. He had been managing irritable bowel symptoms with medication and having regular checkups related to “sludge” in his gallbladder in the three years before that.

After a nine-day stay in hospital, Wilson was told that the biliary sepsis had been caused by E coli in his gallbladder, and he was referred for the organ to be removed.

“My GP told me, if you can, I would suggest private,” Wilson, who lives in Worcestershire, said. “They said it could be up to a 12-month wait. If you can get rid of the gallbladder do that, you don’t want the risk of E coli and sepsis again.”

Wilson was shocked: “Sepsis, that’s what you see plastered on [the] side of buses, saying it kills people. We all know sepsis kills very quickly, which was part of the reason we decided to have it done privately.” But he said he wasn’t too surprised at the long wait: “Because of the hit of the pandemic, I’ve seen the impact on my GP surgery, too.”

Following a consultation with a private provider in late 2022, he had the gallbladder removal surgery (also known as a cholecystectomy) in February 2023 at a cost of £6,800. “It was a lot of money – I consider myself fortunate,” he said.

Wilson said he knew of multiple people who had chosen to have operations privately in recent years, such as knee surgery and hip replacements.

He said he was disappointed to resort to the private sector. “I’d rather the NHS did it,” he said. “But given we had the choice and circumstance, we decided to do it. The service was exemplary – but my [previous] care in an NHS hospital was also exemplary. My health is much better now.”

## **‘My retirement lump sum is just gone now’**

Helen, a semi-retired frontline worker in south-east England, spent nearly £50,000 of her retirement savings on major spinal surgery to get her life back after two years of debilitating pain.

Helen, 56, began experiencing extreme lower back pain and leg pain in September 2021, triggered by a dog colliding with her leg in the park. Though it was not caused by the trigger, she was diagnosed by the NHS with spondylosis in November 2021, and then a pars defect (a condition affecting the lower spine), and offered scans and physiotherapy. She said six months of physiotherapy, beginning in early 2022, resulted in no improvement, and she was offered pain management and a steroid epidural, which she said also did not help.

“I rarely ventured out in these two years … due to the extreme pain I was in when sitting, standing or walking. Life effectively stopped in 2021,” she said. Desperate, she booked a consultation in May 2023 with a neurosurgeon and was told she needed an operation.

Helen asked whether it would be possible for the neurosurgeon, who also works within the NHS, to do it on the NHS rather than privately. A referral could be made, she was told – but the surgery was likely to involve a [waiting time](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/sep/14/record-number-people-waiting-start-routine-nhs-hospital-treatment-england) of 18 months to two years. “My husband and I discussed it, and he said: you’ve already had no life for the last two years, do you really want to wait another two?”

She had the spinal surgery in August 2023 and is now managing her pain with over-the-counter medication, rather than the stronger painkillers she was on before. It cost her a staggering £48,345.

Helen said although she would not be able to work in a physical role again, the surgery gave her back “the ability to have a functional day”. “I can go for short walks and get in the shower without being in excruciating pain. It gave me back my life.”

But the financial hit has been huge. “I was absolutely gutted to have to go private. This has knocked us both; we didn’t see us in our lives having to pay for something like this. We’ve managed our finances carefully and always saved where we can. But that lump sum [that we] can access when we retire … That lump sum has just gone now.”