

Has someone you know gone missing?

A reference guide

Factsheet 2

It can be a traumatic experience when someone you know goes missing. This factsheet is intended as a starting point to help you by setting out a list of things to do, or to think about, when you first realise that someone has gone missing.

The first hour

It may be difficult to know what to do when someone goes missing; however, it is critical that you take immediate action, especially if the person could be in danger.

- Search their home or the place the person was last seen, in case the missing person is hiding or may have fallen or been injured
- Look out for any messages, notes or clues that may suggest where they are
- Contact family members, friends and their work or school to check that they are actually missing.

It may be helpful to keep a record of what you have done, every phone conversation you have had and anything that seems out of the ordinary or suspicious.

However, do not delay – if you have established that someone is missing, report them as missing to your local police immediately.

Remember, you do not have to wait 24 hours before reporting someone as missing to the police.

Provide detailed information to the police

The police may take full details straight away or they may take some basic details to help them carry out initial enquiries and come back to you to obtain more detailed information if the person has still not returned. This is because most people return or are found quite quickly. Information that the police will find helpful includes:

- Physical description of the missing person, including details of birthmarks, scars, tattoos, glasses, etc and details of what clothes they are wearing, if known
- Any medication that they were taking, any medical issues they may have (including physical and mental illnesses such as depression). Let the police know if they have taken their medication with them or not
- What their last known movements were
- Any other information which may suggest they are vulnerable
- Anything unusual or out of character – think about the normal routine of the person who is missing and what they were doing at the time they went missing
- What you think the missing person may have taken with them. Tell the police if the missing person has not taken something with them that they would normally have with them (for example, keys, mobile phone, purse, etc). Check to see if they have taken their passport (if they have one)

- Details of the missing person's mobile phone number and network operator (if known)
- Details and information about the missing person's computer or laptop, including email addresses and details of social networking sites, blogs, personal websites or online information-sharing sites. You and/or the police may wish to access them to obtain information
- If the missing person's car or motorcycle is missing, you need to mention this to the police and give them a description and the registration number (if you know it).

Give the police as much relevant information as you can and let them know of any steps you have already taken to try to locate the missing person.

Make a list of contacts for the police

This list should include contact details for other people who know the person who is missing and might be able to help the police, for example:

- Family
- Friends
- Their employer or school
- Anyone else who may have information on their whereabouts.

Remember to write down their full names, telephone numbers, home addresses, work numbers and work addresses if you know what they are. If you have already spoken to any of these people, tell the police and let them know what information they were able to provide.

If you are going to be making lots of phone calls to relatives and friends, you may find it best to do this in a way that keeps your own telephone free for receiving incoming calls, in case the missing person is trying to contact you. For example, you could use a friend's mobile phone.

If you leave the house, you might want to arrange for someone else to be there to answer your phone, or instead make sure that your voice mail or answering machine is switched on.

Make a list of possible locations

- Consider places the person may have gone, such as places they like to visit or previous addresses and make a list of these places
- Include places where they have been found in this list, if they have ever been missing before.

Provide photographs

- Find some recent photos of the missing person and give them to the investigating officer. Head shots are best if possible
- If you don't have any recent photos, make sure that you advise the police officer of the year the photo was taken and whether there are any differences in the person's appearance now
- If you have any video or DVD footage of the missing person, it may also be of use to the investigating team.

Advise the police if the missing person is a child at risk of harm

- If the missing person is a child who may be at risk of harm, in certain circumstances the police may be able to launch a Child Rescue Alert
- If you think that your child may be taken outside the country for some reason (e.g., abducted by the other parent), tell the police as they can take certain measures to ensure that they are alerted if the abductor tries to leave the country. They can also arrange for an Interpol Yellow Notice to be circulated for the missing child and for the details to be added to Interpol's missing children database.

Contact local hospitals

- The police may also be doing this, but if you contact them, this may reduce the time taken to locate someone. You may want to do this prior to reporting them missing
- Remember that if the missing person has been in an accident and is/was unconscious, they may not be able to give their name, so you also need to ask about

any recent admissions where the person's name is unknown

- The police may have a local means of circulating an alert around the NHS trust area in which the person has gone missing
- The police are likely to contact their Coroner's Liaison Officer, to ask whether the local Coroner has received any details of any unidentified persons that meet the description of the missing person. The police may also contact the UK Missing Persons Bureau to check if they know of any unidentified persons found in other areas of the UK that might meet the description of the missing person. You may wish to check with the police to see if you can assist with these enquiries by providing any extra information that might be relevant or helpful.

Searching for the missing person

- You may wish to search the areas your family member or friend went missing from, places they like to go, or where you last saw them. However, you need to ensure that you discuss this with the police. This is because the police will be managing the overall search strategy and you will need to ensure that any searches that you or other volunteers undertake are co-ordinated with them
- If the area the person went missing from was near a lake, river or sea, the police will have considered searching the water as part of their search planning. It is important that you co-ordinate with police and let specialist teams search dangerous areas.

Do not place yourself at risk of harm at any time.

- If your family member or friend went missing in a remote area, for example while hill walking or mountaineering, the police may contact the local Highland or Lowland Search and Rescue team, who can assist with the search. You must always inform the police if you request assistance from a search and rescue team yourself, as the Police Search Advisor (PoISA) will need to co-ordinate the search. Again, do not place yourself at risk of harm

- Depending on the circumstances, the police will check their Custody system, just to check the possibility that the missing person has been arrested.

Consider limiting access to the missing person's home or room

- Consider limiting access to the missing person's bedroom or home until the police have searched and collected evidence
- Remember that clothing, bedding and other personal items may hold important evidence and information for the police, so do not wash anything or clean their room. Do not touch their hairbrush or toothbrush, but ensure that these items are highlighted to the police as they may wish to take them for the collection of DNA. This is important if the person is missing for a long period.

Make notes

- Keep a notepad with you at all times to write down information given to you by friends, family and the police
- Use it to record any questions you have thought of that you may wish to ask the police next time you speak to them
- Write down the name and number of the officer investigating the case and/or the police force's Missing Persons Co-ordinator
- Ask what the risk assessment is for the missing person is (low, medium or high) and make a note of it.

Think about you

Take care of yourself and your family and do not be afraid to ask others for help or support where possible. A number of charities may be able to provide support and advice and contact details can be found in the factsheet *Organisations that can help* and online. You can assist the investigation better and be there for the missing person when they return or are located, if you take care of yourself.

The first week

Establish regular contact

- Ensure you have a point of contact within the police and establish how often they will be in contact to provide updates and/or how often and when you may contact them
- You may wish to speak to the investigating officer about the steps that are being taken to find the missing person. The police will provide information, where possible, on what is being done. You may wish to ask, for example: What searches have been conducted? Which organisations, such as the UK Missing Persons Bureau, have been contacted? Is the person listed as missing on the Police National Computer?

Consider accessing additional support

- The disappearance of a close friend or relative can be very distressing. You might experience strong emotional reactions and find it difficult to cope
- Several charities may be able to provide you with help. Details of some of these organisations are listed on the factsheet *Organisations that can help*, which is available on the UK Missing Persons Bureau website www.missingpersons.police.uk along with links to some of the charities such as Missing People. Many organisations are also listed on the internet
- You may find it helpful to read the document *Someone is Missing*, an emotional resource for families and friends of missing persons, available at www.missingpersons.org.au/
- You may need to speak to your employer to advise them of the situation and discuss how to balance work and searching for the missing person.

Publicity

Raising awareness of your missing friend or family member may assist in their location. Discuss with the police officer investigating the case to decide what publicity to do and what information should be provided to the media and what should not.

- **Posters** – You can create a Missing Person poster and put this up around their home address, around the area they went missing in and anywhere else you think best. The poster should include a photograph, details of the physical description of the missing person, especially any unusual or distinguishing features, such as tattoos or braces, when and where they went missing from and anything else which may assist members of the public to recognise them
- **Do not put your personal contact details on the poster** as this could place you in a vulnerable situation. Include the relevant telephone number for the investigating police force (a 24 hour number is best) and /or the charity Missing People, who have a Sightings telephone line which people can call to report a sighting of a missing person (116 000)
- **Engagement with local media** – You may be able to liaise with the Media Officer for the investigating force to issue press releases and for media events
- **Internet publicity** – Consider creating a website or social networking page to highlight the details of the missing person and to capture information.

Be aware that if the media do become interested in the case, they may approach others for information on the missing person. They may also run the story in a different way to what you expect.

If you feel you cannot handle the media yourself, ask a trusted family member or friend to act as a spokesperson. Also bear in mind that the media sometimes have more news than they can use, so although you may have been interviewed or may have provided material for a news story, this does not guarantee that they will run the story.

More information on publicity can be obtained from the factsheet *How publicity can help*, available on the UK Missing Persons Bureau website www.missingpersons.police.uk.

Provide additional information to the police

- Consider whether there are additional details that may be of assistance to the police. Expand your list of contacts to include anyone who may have seen the person before or after they went missing, for example: additional friends, acquaintances, extended family members, delivery companies, postal delivery staff, etc
- If you haven't already done so, provide the police with the contact details of your family's doctor and dentist. As part of their collection of details on the missing person, the police may wish to contact their doctor and dentist to obtain their medical and dental records.

Make a list of things others can do to help

Make a list of things that volunteers can do for you and your family, in case someone asks how they can help (e.g. set up a social networking page on the internet, or create and circulate a poster).

If relevant, contact local shelters

Depending on the circumstances, it might be worth contacting local homeless shelters or hotels to see if the missing person may be staying in one of these places.

Next steps

If you have not already done so, you may wish to consider some of the following steps:

- Develop a plan and set a schedule with goals for continuing the search for the missing person. Work with the investigating officer to decide what role you and others can play in the long term search
- Schedule regular contact visits or telephone calls with the investigating officer to review the status of the investigation and to receive updates at a mutually agreed frequency. Keep in mind that the police may not be able to share some information with you. However, if at any stage you have new or important

information, make sure you contact the investigating team immediately

- Find out what other organisations such as charities, local community teams and other support groups can do to assist you. For example, your Neighbourhood Watch group might be able to look out for the missing person and distribute posters. Details of some of these organisations are listed on the factsheet *Organisations that can help*, available on the UK Missing Persons Bureau website www.missingpersons.police.uk.
- Keep the community's awareness of the missing person high, by keeping the media interested and involved where possible
 - You may wish to seek out assistance from political figures, influential members of the community or anyone else who can help press interest in your case or get the missing persons photo and details in the press.
 - You might find it helpful to prepare a media pack, which includes information such as when and where the person went missing, their description, photographs and telephone numbers for people to call with information. You can then give this to local radio stations and any other interested media organisations. This will help you to ensure that awareness is kept high and will mean that you do not have to personally recount all of this information every time you speak to someone.
 - Consider highlighting the case on the anniversary of their disappearance and their birthday, although these will be stressful times for you. This will keep awareness of the missing person high, even if it is a long time since they went missing
 - Most people who go missing return or are found quite quickly. However, if your friend or family member has been missing for several years, it may be beneficial to produce and circulate an age-progressed image, to raise awareness of how the person will look now. There are several specialists who offer this service. More information can be obtained from your police force. They can request the details of specialists from the NCA Specialist

Operations Centre. The charity Missing People may also be able to provide information or assistance

- Consider all potential media options. Speak to your investigating officer and/or a helpful charity about contacting television shows such as *Missing Live* to raise awareness.
- Make sure you have given the investigating team everything that could help with the investigation, including the missing person's computers, relevant notes and so on
- Confirm that any DNA obtained for the missing person (e.g. from tooth and hair brushes) has been added to the National Missing Persons DNA Database. This DNA sample will only be used to cross reference with missing and unidentified persons. It will not be added to the national criminal database or used for any other purpose. The DNA will also be destroyed once the missing person is found
- Confirm that the dental records for the missing person, if they are registered with a dentist, have been added to the National Missing Persons Dental Record Collection, held at the UK National Missing Persons Bureau
- Find out if fingerprints or palm prints are available for the missing person. These might be obtained from the missing person's property, for example. Confirm that they are sent to the UK Missing Persons Bureau
- Periodically contact the police for updates to check that the person is still listed as missing on the Police National Computer.

Accessing additional support

It can be very distressing when someone goes missing. Take care of yourself and do not be afraid to ask others for help and support. The charity Missing People may be able to provide you with some additional advice, support and assistance with publicity. In some circumstances, Missing People may be able to assist by attempting to make contact with the missing person and communicate with them on your behalf.

Contact Missing People:

116 000 (freephone number)
Website: www.missingpeople.org
Email: info@missingpeople.org

Need more help?

If you require more information, other factsheets can be downloaded from the Missing Persons Bureau website <http://www.missingpersons.police.uk>

For additional copies, to enquire about the content of this document or request the information in an alternative format, please contact the UK Missing Persons Bureau on 0845 000 5481 or email missingpersons bureau@nca.x.gsi.gov.uk

The information in this guide is not definitive and should be utilised in conjunction with police guidance and independent legal advice.