

A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR NEWCOMERS

How to See a Doctor in China

For foreigners who may not speak Chinese

看 病 指 南

Healthcare navigation only - not medical advice

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Understand the hospital steps, choose a service route, follow official booking guidance, and use insurance correctly.

Start Here: A Step-by-Step System

A hospital visit in China is usually a sequence of separate steps - not a family-doctor referral journey.

In many referral-based systems, a family doctor or GP coordinates the route into specialist care. In a Chinese public hospital, you normally enter through either the **Emergency Department** or a pre-booked **outpatient appointment**, then move through registration, waiting, consultation, payment, examinations, a return consultation and the pharmacy. Each step may happen at a different counter, machine, floor or building.^{[1][2]}

Emergency Department entry

Go to the emergency reception or pre-triage desk. Staff direct you to registration and the correct waiting or consultation area.

Pre-triage → Register → Room & queue

Outpatient entry

Book through the hospital's official WeChat account or mini-program, bind your identity, choose a department, doctor and time, then check in when you arrive.

Book in WeChat → Bind passport →

Check in

After you enter the queue, the core cycle is usually similar

1 • Wait

Watch the screen for your number, name and consultation-room number.

2 • First consultation

Explain the situation and show relevant records.

3 • Pay & test

Pay for ordered examinations before going to the test location.

4 • Collect results

Wait for the report and check how to access or print it.

5 • Return check-in

Check in again at the machine or nurse station for a return consultation.

6 • Doctor review

Wait for the call and show the report to the doctor.

7 • Pay for medicine

Pay after the doctor issues a prescription.

8 • Pharmacy

Go to the hospital pharmacy and collect the prescribed medicine.

Scope: this guide explains the administrative journey. It does not decide whether you need emergency or outpatient care, select a department based on symptoms, or give diagnosis, treatment or medicine advice. Follow hospital staff and licensed professionals.

1 · Emergency Department: The Usual Flow

This is the in-hospital administrative process after you arrive at an Emergency Department. Exact order varies by hospital.

1

Go to emergency reception or pre-triage (预检分诊)

Staff first direct the patient into the hospital's emergency workflow and indicate where to register.

2

Register and create or activate the patient record

Present the original passport when requested and pay the registration fee. A ticket, screen or staff member will direct you to a consultation area or room.

3

Wait for the call

Watch the display for the queue number, name and room number. Emergency queues may follow clinical priority rather than simple arrival order.

4

First consultation

Enter when called and explain the situation. Show relevant records, current medicines and known allergies.

5

Pay for ordered examinations

If the doctor orders laboratory tests, imaging or another examination, pay first through the hospital app, machine or cashier, then go to the location shown on the order or receipt.^[1]

6

Complete the examination and wait for the report

Some routine results may be ready in roughly 30-60 minutes; others take longer or become available on another day. Confirm the expected time and where the report will appear.

7

Check in for the return consultation

After receiving the result, use the department's return-visit or check-in machine, or report to the nurse station. The method varies by hospital.

8

Wait again and show the report to the doctor

Watch the screen for the new call, return to the consultation room and give the doctor the test report.

9

Pay for the prescription and collect medicine

If medicine is prescribed, pay first, then go to the hospital pharmacy and collect it using the receipt, hospital card or electronic record.^[1]

Remember: registration, examination payment, return check-in and pharmacy collection are separate actions. Do not leave a counter or department until you know the next location and whether another scan or payment is required.

2 · Outpatient: Book First, Then Follow the Cycle

A common route is to book through the hospital's official WeChat account or mini-program before visiting.

1

Search the hospital in WeChat

Use the search box at the top of WeChat. Open the hospital's verified official account or official mini-program - not an unofficial booking agent.

2

Follow, log in and bind the patient identity

Open appointment registration, add the patient and complete real-name verification. Use the foreign-passport option where available and enter the name exactly as shown on the passport.^[5]

3

Select the hospital campus and department

Large hospitals may have several campuses. If you are unsure which department to choose, use the hospital's official guidance, online pre-consultation tool or service desk rather than guessing.^[4]

4

Select the doctor and a suitable time

Review whether the listing is ordinary outpatient, specialist, VIP or international service. Complete any required payment and save the confirmation screen.

5

Go to the correct campus at the booked time

Bring the original passport. A first visit may still require manual registration or activation of a hospital card at a staffed counter.

6

Check in at the department (报到)

Scan the booking code, hospital card or passport at the check-in machine, or report to the nurse station. This places you in the local queue.

7

Wait for the screen to call you

The display normally shows your queue number or name and the consultation-room number. Enter only when called.

After the first consultation

Pay for tests

Use the app, payment machine or cashier before going to the examination department.

Complete tests

Follow the order or receipt to the correct window, floor or building.

Return check-in

After the results are ready, scan or report again and wait for the return call.

Prescription & pharmacy

After the doctor reviews the results, pay for prescribed medicine and collect it from the hospital pharmacy.

Appointment, registration and check-in are different. A successful WeChat booking does not always mean you can walk directly into the consultation room.

3 · How to Choose a Hospital Route

Compare language support, cost, insurance, service level and the exact department - not just the hospital name.

Route	What the process feels like	Language & cost	Insurance & limits
Public hospital ordinary department	Department-based booking, busy shared facilities, self-service machines and staged payment.	Usually the lowest-cost route. English support varies; administrative areas often operate mainly in Chinese.	Commercial direct billing is uncommon. Many foreign patients pay first and claim later.
Public hospital international / VIP	A separate service area inside a public hospital, often with appointment assistance and a more guided visit.	More bilingual support and higher fees than ordinary departments.	Direct billing may be available, but only for participating insurers, policies and departments.
Private / international hospital	Appointment-led, bilingual administration and a process more familiar to many Western patients.	Usually the highest-cost route; English support is often stronger.	Insurance networks may be extensive, but pre-authorisation and service capability vary by facility.
Community health service centre	Local neighbourhood facility with simpler services and locally managed registration.	Generally lower-cost; English and foreign-passport handling may be limited.	Commercial direct billing is uncommon. Confirm the exact service and opening hours directly.

Five checks before choosing

1 · Correct department and campus

Confirm the exact branch, building and department shown in the appointment.

2 · Passport acceptance

Ask whether first-time foreign-passport registration can be completed online or must be done on site.

3 · Language support

Confirm whether English support applies only to the doctor or also to registration, tests and pharmacy.

4 · Insurance route

Ask your insurer about the exact hospital department, not simply the hospital name.

5 · Current service hours

International departments, specialist clinics and specific services may have limited schedules.

Official directory

Shanghai publishes an English directory of international medical services, contacts and opening hours.^[4]

Do not assume every private facility offers the same services. Confirm the facility's current capabilities, department and opening hours before travelling.^[3]

4 · Before You Go: Passport, Phone & Payment

A short checklist prevents most administrative delays.

✓ **Original passport**

Bring the physical document even when the appointment was booked online.

✓ **Appointment screenshot**

Save the hospital, campus, department, doctor, date, time and QR code.

✓ **Hospital address in Chinese**

Large hospitals may have several campuses, gates and outpatient buildings.

✓ **Phone, data and battery**

You may need WeChat, SMS codes, digital payment, queue screens and test results.

✓ **Two payment methods**

Prepare WeChat Pay or Alipay plus a backup card or cash where accepted.

✓ **Insurance information**

Bring the policy number, hotline, digital card and any pre-authorisation letter.

✓ **Previous records**

Bring relevant reports, images, prescriptions and discharge summaries.

✓ **Medicines and allergies**

Bring a written list or clear photos of packaging for the doctor to review.

✓ **Language backup**

Prepare a translation app, bilingual contact or interpreter arrangement.

✓ **Extra time**

Allow time for first-visit registration, security and finding the correct building.

预约 yùyuē

Book a time before the visit

挂号 guàhào

Register and activate the visit

报到 bàodào

Check in at the department queue

Foreign-passport registration: Shanghai's official platforms support passport-based identity verification, but hospital mini-programs and first-visit rules are not identical. Enter the name exactly as shown on the passport. If the system rejects the profile, use the hospital's official customer service or staffed registration counter instead of inventing a different identity format.^{[5][8]}

Keep the next step visible. After every payment, test or consultation, check the receipt, app or screen for the next building, floor, window, queue number and whether another check-in is required.

5 · The Payment-Test-Return Cycle

This repeating cycle is the part many first-time foreign patients do not expect.

1 · Doctor orders a service

The order may be electronic or printed and should show the examination or medicine.

2 · Pay first

Use the hospital mini-program, self-service machine or cashier before the next department processes the order.

3 · Go to the location

Follow the receipt or order to the laboratory, imaging area or other examination department.

4 · Wait for the result

Check whether it appears in the app, at a printing machine, on paper or at a collection window.

5 · Check in again

Use the return-consultation machine or nurse station before going back to the doctor.

6 · Doctor reviews it

Wait for the screen to call you and show the result in the consultation room.

7 · Pay for prescribed medicine

The prescription is usually activated for collection only after payment.

8 · Collect at the pharmacy

Use the receipt, hospital card or electronic code at the pharmacy window.

9 · Keep every document

Save receipts, reports, prescription records and the official invoice for insurance.

Before leaving the hospital, confirm

- › Where and when any remaining test result will be available.
- › Whether you need a new registration for a result that appears on another day.
- › How to book the next appointment, if one is required.
- › Where to download the official electronic medical invoice.
- › Whether an English medical summary is available; ordinary public-hospital records may be Chinese only.

Same-day return: Shanghai's official local-hospital guide says that when results are available quickly, a patient may be able to return to the original doctor; if results appear on another day, a new registration may be required. Always confirm the specific hospital's process.^[1]

Result timing varies. Do not plan around one fixed waiting time. Routine laboratory reports, imaging and specialised tests can follow different schedules.

6 · Insurance: Know Your Route Before the Visit

The hospital route and the insurance route must match. Confirm both before you rely on cashless payment.

Chinese basic medical insurance

This route applies only if you are enrolled through eligible employment or another qualifying arrangement. Foreign employees working in China are covered by the national social-insurance rules.

[9]

- Confirm that the hospital and department are designated for your plan.
- Use the physical or electronic social-security credential accepted by the hospital.
- The system settles eligible costs; you pay the remaining personal share.
- Keep the medical-insurance settlement statement (医保结算单).

Commercial direct billing

The hospital sends eligible charges to the insurer or its administrator instead of asking you to pay the full bill first.

- Verify the exact hospital, department and service in the insurer's network.
- Show your passport, insurance card and any approval letter before treatment.
- Complete or sign a direct-billing form if requested.
- Pay deductibles, co-payments and non-covered charges yourself.

Self-pay and claim later

This is common in ordinary public-hospital departments and whenever direct billing is unavailable.

- Pay each hospital charge through an official channel.
- Collect the invoice, itemised list and medical documents before leaving.
- Submit through the insurer's app, portal, email or claim form.
- Meet the policy deadline and keep complete copies.

Ask these six questions first

- Is this exact hospital **and department** covered?
- What deductible, co-payment or annual limit applies?
- Which originals, stamps, translations and reports are required?
- Does direct billing apply to outpatient, inpatient or both?
- Is pre-authorisation or a guarantee of payment required?
- What is the submission deadline and claim method?

Insurance does not make billing automatic. A hospital can be “in network” while only its international/VIP department offers direct billing. Ordinary departments may still require full payment upfront. Verify with both the insurer and the hospital.

7 · Direct Billing & Pre-authorisation

Direct billing is a payment arrangement. Pre-authorisation is the insurer's advance approval for specified care.

1 · Search the network

Use the insurer or third-party administrator's current provider directory. Confirm the hospital, campus and department.

2 · Contact the insurer

Ask whether the planned service needs pre-authorisation, a guarantee-of-payment letter or a specific booking channel.

3 · Obtain written approval

If required, the doctor or hospital may need to submit clinical and cost information. Keep the approval reference or letter.

4 · Verify at the hospital

Before the consultation or admission, show your passport, insurance card and approval. Ask the billing desk to confirm eligibility.

5 · Complete the visit

The hospital and insurer settle eligible charges. You remain responsible for deductibles, co-payments and excluded items.

6 · Keep documents anyway

Save the medical record, itemised statement and any patient-paid receipt in case the insurer later asks for evidence.

When might pre-authorisation be required?

- Inpatient admission or day-case treatment
- Surgery or other high-cost treatment
- Advanced imaging or policy-listed examinations
- Extended rehabilitation or repeated treatment

There is no universal list or price threshold. Each insurer and policy defines its own pre-authorisation rules. International insurers commonly use pre-approval for inpatient and high-cost treatment to assess coverage and facilitate direct payment. ^[11]

Approval is specific

It may apply only to the named service, provider, date or estimated cost. A changed plan or added service may require another review.

Approval is not unlimited coverage

Non-covered items, policy limits and your personal cost share can still apply even when direct billing has been arranged.

For an unplanned hospitalisation: contact the insurer or assistance line as soon as practical and follow the notification rule in your policy. Do not wait until discharge to ask how the bill will be handled.

8 · Self-Pay & Reimbursement: Build the Claim File

Treat claim documents as part of the hospital visit. Reconstructing them later can be difficult.

- 1 Open the claim route**
Check the policy's claim channel, deadline and required form. For a large or inpatient claim, notify the insurer early.
- 2 Keep proof of every payment**
Save registration, examination, medicine and hospital-payment receipts or screenshots.
- 3 Download the official medical invoice (发票)**
Shanghai's municipal and district public medical institutions use electronic medical invoices. Ask the hospital where to view and download the PDF.^[6]
- 4 Obtain the itemised cost breakdown**
The total invoice should be supported by a list showing consultation, tests, materials, medicine and other charged items.
- 5 Collect the medical evidence**
Keep the consultation record, prescription, examination and imaging reports, diagnosis documents and follow-up instructions.
- 6 Add inpatient documents, if applicable**
Ask for the discharge summary, final inpatient cost list and the medical-record documents required by your insurer.
- 7 Check every name, date and amount**
The invoice, hospital record and passport identity should match. Ask the hospital billing or records office to correct errors before submission.
- 8 Submit and keep copies**
Upload or send the complete claim file before the deadline. Keep the original files and respond promptly to requests for additional evidence.

Typical claim file

Document	Outpatient claim	Inpatient claim
Financial	Official invoice, itemised list, proof of payment	Official invoice, final inpatient cost list, proof of payment
Medical	Consultation record, prescription, test reports	Discharge summary, inpatient record or diagnosis documents, test reports
Insurance	Claim form, policy/member details	Claim form plus pre-authorisation or guarantee documents where required

This is a preparation checklist, not a universal requirement. Insurers differ on originals, hospital stamps, English translations, certified copies and submission format. Follow the current checklist for your own policy.

9 · Electronic Invoices & Two-Layer Coverage

Two documents cause many claim delays: the official invoice and, when another payer has already contributed, the settlement statement.

Electronic medical invoice

- ✓ Look in the hospital's official WeChat account, mini-program or electronic-ticket service after payment.
- ✓ Download and save the original PDF, not only a screenshot.
- ✓ Check the patient's name, visit date, invoice number and total amount.
- ✓ Keep the matching itemised statement and payment record.
- ✓ If a paper original has been issued, ask the insurer whether it requires that paper version.
- ✓ Do not submit a cancelled, refunded or duplicated invoice as a valid expense.

Shanghai public medical institutions have citywide electronic-medical-invoice coverage, and insurers increasingly use digital invoice verification.^{[6][12]}

Basic insurance + commercial insurance

- ✓ Confirm the order of payment required by the commercial policy.
- ✓ Where applicable, use Chinese basic medical insurance at the designated hospital first.
- ✓ Pay the remaining personal share and keep the hospital invoice or permitted copy.
- ✓ Obtain the medical-insurance settlement statement or split statement (医保结算单 / 费用分割单).
- ✓ Submit the statement with the invoice copy and medical documents to the commercial insurer.
- ✓ The commercial insurer assesses the remaining eligible expense under its own contract.

Insurer examples show that a third-party or social-insurance settlement statement may be required when part of the expense has already been paid elsewhere.^[13]

Before leaving the hospital

Invoice saved

Official electronic invoice or required paper original

Costs explained

Itemised outpatient or final inpatient breakdown

Medical file

Record, prescription, reports and discharge summary where applicable

Insurance evidence

Settlement statement, approval reference and patient-paid receipts

Fix document errors immediately. A mismatch in the passport name, visit date or amount can delay a claim. Ask the hospital's billing or medical-records office how to correct it before you leave.

Official Tutorials, Insurance & Shanghai Resources

Scan these official pages before a visit. Hospital procedures, digital systems and insurance rules can change.



Local hospital step-by-step guide

Shanghai government guide to registration, consultation, payment, tests and pharmacy collection.



Public vs private hospitals

Official comparison of ordinary departments, international services and private facilities.



International Medical Services Directory

Official English list of hospitals and clinics serving international patients.



Suishenban passport registration

Official foreign-passport authentication and Shanghai digital-services guide.



Shanghai electronic medical invoices

Official explanation of citywide electronic invoices in public medical institutions.



Electronic Social Security Card guide

Bilingual national guide for foreigners holding a valid work permit.

Useful official numbers in Shanghai: 120 for medical emergency and ambulance service; 12345 for non-emergency government service questions. Language availability and service scope can vary.

Important limitation. This publication provides healthcare-navigation and administrative information only. It does not provide diagnosis, treatment, medication guidance or symptom-based triage. Hospital procedures, prices, apps, language services, insurance networks, claim documents and approval rules vary. Verify current information with the hospital, insurer, employer or relevant authority. Although the title refers to China, the operational detail in this edition is primarily Shanghai-specific.

- [1] Shanghai Municipal Government, *How to see a doctor at a local hospital*, updated May 2026.
- [2] Shanghai Municipal Government, *A student's guide to public hospitals in China*, Oct. 29, 2024.
- [3] Shanghai Municipal Government, *Public vs private hospitals, tips and differences*, Aug. 19, 2025.
- [4] Shanghai Municipal Government, *Shanghai: International Medical Services*, accessed July 28, 2026.
- [5] Shanghai Municipal Government, *A guide to using "Shanghai QR Code"*, updated July 2026.
- [6] Shanghai Municipal Finance Bureau, *Full coverage of electronic medical invoices in municipal and district public medical institutions*, Feb. 24, 2023.
- [7] Shanghai Municipal Government, *Regulations of Shanghai Municipality on Emergency Medical Services*, accessed July 2026.
- [8] Shanghai Municipal Government, *Implementation opinions on international medical services*, Jan. 8, 2025.
- [9] Shanghai Municipal Government, *Interim Measures for Foreigners Employed in China to Participate in Social Insurance*, published Aug. 26, 2024.
- [10] Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, *Manual for Foreigners Working in China: How to Use the Electronic Social Security Card*, Dec. 1, 2024.
- [11] Allianz Care, *Pre-authorisation Process & Forms*, accessed July 28, 2026 (insurer-specific example).
- [12] Shanghai Municipal Finance Bureau, *Electronic medical invoices supporting commercial-insurance claims*, Aug. 27, 2025.
- [13] Ping An Health / CPIC claim guidance, current examples reviewed July 2026; exact documents remain policy-specific.