

A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR NEWCOMERS

How to See a Doctor in China

For foreigners who don't speak Chinese

看 病 指 南

draft v1 · triage & fees checked against official 2026 standards

SHANGHAI EDITION

Start Here — Read This First

Two things about Chinese hospitals that surprise almost every foreigner.

1. There is no family doctor / GP step. Back home you might see a GP first, who then refers you to a specialist. In China you go **straight to the hospital** and you **choose the department yourself**. No referral, no gatekeeper. (Chapter 3 helps you pick the right department.)

2. You usually pay first, then get served. Before you see the doctor you pay a **consultation fee** (门诊诊查费 — this is what used to be called the "registration fee"). Then, **after** the doctor sees you, you pay again for any tests and medicine before you can get them. Paying happens in stages, at machines or on your phone — not once at the end. (Amounts are in Chapter 5.)

About this guide. This is a practical orientation, **not medical advice**. Rules, prices and apps change and vary by hospital. For anything urgent or uncertain, when in doubt, call **120** or get to a hospital. Always follow what doctors and staff tell you on site.

1 · I Am Sick — Right Now

A 30-second check: how serious is it, and what to do this minute. Not sure between two levels? **Always act on the more serious one.**

1 Life-threatening

→ **Call 120 now. Do NOT travel there yourself.**

Call if you see any of these: sudden collapse or unresponsiveness · struggling to breathe, can't finish a sentence, lips turning blue · crushing chest pain lasting 15+ minutes, spreading to arm, jaw or back, with cold sweat · stroke signs — face drooping, arm weakness, slurred speech, sudden loss of balance or vision (any one = call now) · bleeding that spurts or won't stop · a seizure · a severe allergic reaction: rash with throat tightening or trouble breathing.

Do not drive yourself or take a taxi — the ambulance treats on the way and takes you to a hospital that can handle your case, not just the nearest one. Say your **address first**. Full 120 call script in Chapter 6.

2 Serious, but you can move

→ **Go to a hospital Emergency (急诊 jízhěn) yourself.**

e.g. fever over 39°C that won't come down (or over 38.5°C for two days) · a wound that needs stitches · a likely fracture — swelling, deformity, can't bear weight · bleeding that pressure doesn't stop · a deep animal bite · vomiting or diarrhoea so persistent you can't keep water down · a brief faint you've now recovered from.

Take a taxi or a friend. ER treats by severity — an official five-level triage, not arrival order. Tell the triage nurse your **worst symptom first**.

3 Unpleasant, but it can wait

→ **Book an outpatient (门诊 ménzhěn) visit.**

e.g. lingering cough, mild fever, skin rash, a check-up, a chronic condition.

Book ahead on your phone (Chapter 2), then go at your slot. This is the normal, non-urgent route.

4 Minor

→ **A pharmacy (药店 yàodiàn) is enough.**

e.g. a common cold, mild stomach upset, a small cut.

Many everyday medicines are sold over the counter without a prescription. Or visit a neighbourhood community clinic. No need for a big hospital.

Not sure between two levels? Always act on the more serious one. These criteria are simplified for non-medical readers from China's official standards — National Health Commission WS/T 810-2022 (emergency assessment & referral) and the Citizens' Health Literacy guidelines (2024). They are orientation, not diagnosis; when frightened or in doubt, call 120.

2 · Booking & Registration

The step foreigners never expect: in China you usually book your hospital visit in advance — on your phone.

"Registration" (挂号 guàhào) — what it means

Registering is not the medical visit itself. It means **securing your slot and your place in line** to see a doctor in a chosen department. You do it before you see anyone, and you pay a fee for it.

How to book online (the normal way)

- › Most public hospitals take bookings through a hospital's official **WeChat account**, or through Shanghai's city platform "随申办 Suishenban".
- › You register with your **passport** for real-name verification (this can take a few days to approve — do it before you're sick).
- › Pick hospital → department → date/time slot → pay the fee to confirm.
- › Slots open **in advance** — often days to two weeks ahead, and popular doctors fill up fast. Don't assume you can just walk in today.

Which department? Because no GP routes you, you choose the department yourself. If unsure, pick 普通门诊 (general outpatient) first, or ask the hospital's online help. Chapter 3 has a symptom → department table.

If you can't use the apps

You can still register **on-site** at the hospital's registration counter or a self-service machine, with your passport. But on-site numbers are limited and seen **after** everyone who pre-booked, so waits can be long.

One thing to check per hospital: whether your specific hospital accepts **passport bookings online** (some only register foreigners on-site). Confirm on the hospital's own WeChat channel.

3 · Inside the Hospital, Step by Step

It moves between counters and machines — not one room where a doctor handles everything. Here's the whole path.

- 1

Check in (报到/签到)
On arrival, find your department's floor. At the self-service machine outside it, scan your booking code / passport / health QR to check in. This activates your place in the queue — skip it and you won't be called.
- 2

Wait for your number
Watch the screen above the consulting rooms for your number/name. Listen for the call. It's not strictly first-come — booked patients and urgent cases are ordered by the system.
- 3

See the doctor
Describe your symptoms, how long, any medicines you take, any allergies. Bring past reports if you have them. (Phrase cards in Chapter 6.)
- 4

Pay — again
The doctor orders tests or medicine. You now pay for those, on your phone or at a payment machine/counter, **before** you can do them. Keep every receipt (you'll need them for insurance).
- 5

Do any tests (检查)
Once paid, go to the test department. You may need to scan in again and wait. Results may come back in 30 min – 24 h; you may return to the doctor with them.
- 6

Collect medicine (取药)
Take your paid prescription to the pharmacy window. Some hospitals make you scan in once more before they dispense. Check the name, dose and instructions before you leave.

Common symptom → department (so you book the right one)

Your problem	Likely department (科室)
Fever, cough, cold, general feeling ill	全科 / 内科 (General / Internal Medicine)
Stomach, digestion, diarrhoea	消化内科 (Gastroenterology)
Skin, rash	皮肤科 (Dermatology)
Injury, bone, sprain, fracture	骨科 / 急诊 (Orthopaedics / ER)
Ear, nose, throat	耳鼻喉科 (ENT)
Eyes	眼科 (Ophthalmology)
Not sure	普通门诊 (General outpatient) — start here

Department names follow common Shanghai hospital usage; if in doubt, ask at the help desk before paying to register.

4 • Medicine & Pharmacies

Where to get medicine, and one thing that catches people out.

Two ways to get medicine

- › **Hospital pharmacy** — for what a doctor prescribed. Pay first, then collect at the pharmacy window.
- › **Retail pharmacy (药店)** — on the street, for everyday over-the-counter medicine (cold, fever, stomach, painkillers). No prescription needed for OTC. Just describe your symptom, or show the pharmacist the phrase card.

Don't assume the dose is the same as home. The same drug can come in different strengths or under a different name in China. Show the pharmacist the active ingredient name if you can, and check the box before taking it.

Useful pharmacy phrases

我需要感冒药。

Wǒ xūyào gǎnmào yào.

I need cold medicine.

我需要退烧药。

Wǒ xūyào tuìshāo yào.

I need something for fever.

我肚子痛 / 拉肚子。

Wǒ dùzi tòng / lā dùzi.

I have a stomachache / diarrhoea.

我对.....过敏。

Wǒ duì ... guòmǐn.

I'm allergic to ...

5 • Paying, Insurance & Reimbursement

The part where people lose money — by throwing away the wrong piece of paper.

The consultation fee (门急诊诊查费)

This is the first thing you pay, when you register — to get in line to see a doctor. As a foreigner without local insurance, you pay the **full amount**. It depends on the hospital tier and the doctor's seniority:

Hospital tier	General outpatient (full fee)
Tier 1 (community)	about ¥10
Tier 2 (district)	about ¥18
Tier 3 (major hospital)	about ¥25

Seeing a senior specialist costs more (roughly **+¥15** for an associate chief physician, **+¥25** for a chief physician). Emergency (急诊) has its own rates. This fee is small — the big costs come later, from tests and medicine.

If you DO have Shanghai medical insurance (e.g. some scholarship students), insurance covers most of it and you'd pay only a few yuan out of pocket — and **community health centres waive the consultation fee entirely** for the city's insured. These discounts **do not apply** if you're paying as a self-funded foreigner.

If you pay yourself first (most common for foreigners)

If the hospital can't bill your insurer directly, you **pay upfront and claim back later**. Whether you get reimbursed depends almost entirely on keeping the right documents.

Keep ALL of these from every visit — without them, claims get rejected and people end up running back to the hospital for weeks:

- › The official **receipts / invoices** (发票) for every payment
- › Your **medical record** / doctor's notes (病历)
- › The **prescription** (处方) and any test reports

Ask for English records before you leave

If you may claim on international insurance or get follow-up care, ask the doctor for an **English version of your records** — diagnosis, treatment, drug names, follow-up advice — officially stamped by the hospital. It's much harder to get later.

Direct billing saves the hassle. Some hospitals (especially international medical centres and private hospitals) bill your insurer directly, so you only pay what isn't covered. Check before your visit whether your hospital has a direct-settlement agreement with your insurer.

To verify for your situation: what your specific insurance covers, which hospitals direct-bill it, and the exact claim documents your insurer requires. Confirm with your insurer before you need care.

6 · Emergency Kit

Save these on your phone. Show the cards to staff when words fail.

Numbers

Call	For
120	Ambulance / medical emergency
110	Police
119	Fire
Your insurer's hotline	Usually printed on the back of your insurance card — 24/7 help

Calling 120 — say it in this order

- 1 WHERE — the exact address, first**
District, street/lane, building, room — or the nearest big landmark and where you are relative to it. Phone GPS can be off by hundreds of metres, so say it out loud. This is the single most important piece of information.
- 2 WHO & WHAT — one clear sentence**
Age, sex, the worst symptom, how long, what you've done. Like: "28-year-old man, crushing chest pain for 20 minutes, no medicine taken." Mention major conditions and allergies if known.
- 3 YOUR NUMBER — and don't hang up first**
Give a phone that will stay reachable. Answer the dispatcher's questions, and let **them** end the call.

After you hang up: keep your phone line free · send someone to the street or gate to flag the ambulance (use your phone light at night) · gather passport, insurance card and any medicines · if the person vomits, turn their head to the side. (Per official 120 guidance — NHC & Shanghai Emergency Medical Center.)

Show-to-staff phrase cards

这是紧急情况，请帮我叫救护车。我的地址是：_____

Zhè shì jǐnjí qíngkuàng, qǐng bāng wǒ jiào jiùhùchē. Wǒ de dìzhǐ shì: ____

This is an emergency, please call an ambulance. My address is: ____

我要挂号。

Wǒ yào guàhào.

I want to register (to see a doctor).

急诊在哪里？

Jízhěn zài nǎlǐ?

Where is the Emergency department?

我不会说中文。

Wǒ bù huì shuō zhōngwén.

I don't speak Chinese.

请问在哪里付钱？

Qǐngwèn zài nǎlǐ fùqián?

Where do I pay?

我对.....过敏。

Wǒ duì ... guòmǐn.

I'm allergic to ...

请给我英文病历。

Qǐng gěi wǒ yīngwén bìnglì.

Please give me my records in English.

我需要看医生。

Wǒ xūyào kàn yīshēng.

I need to see a doctor.

Key words you'll see on signs

中文	Pinyin	Meaning
挂号	guàhào	Registration
门诊	ménzhěn	Outpatient
急诊	jízhěn	Emergency
收费 / 缴费	shōufèi / jiǎofèi	Payment / cashier
药房 / 取药	yàofáng / qǔyào	Pharmacy / collect medicine
检查	jiǎnchá	Examination / test
化验	huàyàn	Lab test

draft v1 — Emergency criteria and the 120 script follow official NHC standards (WS/T 810-2022; Health Literacy 2024) and Beijing/Shanghai EMS public guidance, simplified for non-medical readers. Pinyin and phrasing to be proofread by a native speaker before publishing. This guide is general orientation, not medical advice; in an emergency call 120.