

An introduction to the Antenatal Ward: Chloe's story

ECHO member Chloe recalls her own experience of spending 2 weeks in the Antenatal Ward at St Thomas' Hospital, to give an introduction and some advice to other parents about your stay.

ARRIVAL

Whether a planned admission or an emergency, it can take some time to be admitted. The environment on the ward changes constantly so there may be a bed that then disappears meaning you are left waiting. Bring a book and prepare yourself for a long wait. If you don't have to wait you can think of that as a bonus!

YOUR BEDSPACE

This is what a typical bay looks like:



There are 4 beds to a bay, each with their own curtain for privacy but as you will soon find out, it can become hot and stuffy quite quickly so it's good to have them open during the day if you can.

You will have a bedside locker to keep your bits and pieces in. You will definitely want to bring your own pillow and pillow case, as the hospital pillows are plastic and flat. Depending on how far along you are you may also want to bring your own pregnancy pillow to help you get as comfy as you can at night.

Have a brightly coloured pillowcase so that there is no chance of the staff mistaking it (and the precious pillow inside) for one of their own! If I left my bed space for any period of time I would take my own pillow off the bed and chuck it on top of my suitcase, just to avoid any accidental swaps if somebody came to change the bed linen.

The ward is EXTREMELY hot. If there is no electric fan by your bed ask for one because they are normally available. I also bought a hand fan with me along with a cooling spray to use during the night. Only bring very thin pyjamas. You will more than likely be asked to wear compression stockings during your stay so you don't want to be wearing anything too tight on your bottom half.

The sun is beautiful when it streams through the windows but can also heat the room very quickly so if you have a window bed you will probably want to draw the blinds in the middle of the day. Don't keep any food on the windowsill!

Ear plugs, headphones and an eye mask are all a necessity. The bays can be very noisy overnight with ongoing admissions and monitoring equipment etc. Lights will go on and off and people will be up and down to use the toilet so even if you're the heaviest sleeper in the world you are likely to be woken up at some stage. It can also be handy during the day just to be able to shut out noise from the ward and have a little break. Complete silence is one of the things that I missed the most.

You will get an antibacterial wipe with your cutlery at meals. If you don't use it, rather than just throwing it away it can be useful to keep to tidy up of your bedside table and locker during your stay.

Bring a few personal items to brighten up your space, but bear in mind you may have to move quickly to elsewhere in the hospital so fully unpacking might not be wise. Flowers are not allowed on the ward so ask visitors not to bring them.

TOILETS AND SHOWERS

Bring flip flops to wear on the ward, especially in the bathroom. There should be a packet of antibacterial wipes in each toilet and you are asked to wipe the seat with these before and after each use. DO NOT flush these wipes down the toilet, they need to go into the orange bin. The system is quite sensitive and anything that gets flushed that shouldn't be will result in a blockage - which can make things unpleasant in a ward full of pregnant women!

Bring your own towel if you can. It's also a nice idea to bring some of your favourite shower gel to make the experience feel a bit more homely and a thin dressing gown to wear to and from the bathroom. Don't forget your toothbrush!

Each bay has a shower and toilet. In some bays they are in the same room and in some they are

separate. They vary in quality! You are free to use any shower in any bay but will probably find it easiest to use the one in your own bay, and you will get used to its particular foibles. In Bay 6 – 9 the shower is operated by a button that you need to push every 15 seconds for example to keep the water flowing. It also takes about 5 presses to get hot. Apparently in Bay 10 – 13 they have the best shower but I quite liked mine in the end. During my stay there was nowhere to hold the shower head in place in Bay 2 – 5, so for washing hair it would be easier to use another shower.

MEALS

All meals are served in the dayroom. You are encouraged to eat your meals in there. Although this may sound mortifying and / or excruciating it is actually a good thing for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it gets you away from your bed space for short periods, which is really important when you are admitted for a long time. A change of view is a good thing – and the dayroom is much cooler than the bays. Secondly, it means that the bay you sleep in isn't contaminated with smells of food which is unpleasant for everyone, particularly if you are sharing a bay with a lady suffering with extreme sickness. If you're a long stayer it is a good chance to meet some of the other patients and share your trials and tribulations and just to keep each other's spirits up.

All meals are announced by the ringing of a bell, and someone will also come up and call into your room that it's ready. You need to collect your meals yourself unless there is a reason that you are bed bound in which case someone will do it for you – but this should be rare.

Breakfast – 8am

This consists of a tray of toast and jam, juice and a small selection of cereals. You might get lucky and spy a croissant on a Sunday! Every morning you will also be asked if you would like egg and beans. The egg is scrambled. If you're on iron supplements I would recommend the addition of beans in the morning!

Lunch – 12 noon

You will be asked at some point in the morning what you would like for lunch. Sometimes this will happen at breakfast, sometimes they will come to your bed space later. Don't worry if you miss them, you can always walk down to the food preparation kitchen or dayroom to see the kitchen staff to let them know what you would like, but they will also try to find you if they know you are outstanding.

You need to give your bed number and decide which main and dessert you would like. There is normally a selection of veg and potatoes to choose from. There will also be yoghurt, fruit and a hot pudding and soup or a sandwich. Not everything is provided to choose from at each meal time, they will only prepare what has been ordered in advance.

When the bell rings walk down to the day room and queue up to have your meal served to you. Some of the catering assistants will serve your tray already plated from the kitchen. You'll soon discover who does what!

At the end of the meal you will need to clear your plate, pop cutlery in the bucket and place your empties on the trolley. If there are leftovers some of the catering assistants will offer those to anyone who is still hungry.

Dinner – 6pm.

This works in the same way as lunch does. Some catering assistants will take your order for both hot meals at breakfast, others will come round twice in a day. You will see that there is quite a long gap between dinner and breakfast, so you will want to make sure that you have a selection of snacks to get you through the evening.

There is a lovely big fridge in the kitchenette if you would like to store your own food and drinks in it. Bear in mind that all patients and staff use the same fridge so it can get quite full and it's best to be considerate when taking up space. Anything you put in the fridge needs to be labelled with your name, bed number and the date you opened it. Anything that isn't labelled will be thrown away, as will anything that is out of date. Labels are provided next to the fridge.

A previous patient very kindly donated a microwave to the ward for everyone to use so you can also avail yourself of the ready meals on offer in M&S downstairs if you want to mix things up a bit from time to time. This can obviously get expensive if you do it all the time, so I reserved it for when I was truly fed up!

OTHER FACILITIES

As well as the obvious cafes and shops as you come into the main entrance of the North Wing there is also a much bigger self-serve café further into the hospital called Shepherd's Hall. It's opposite the entrance to the Evelina, is big and airy and has good views of Parliament. It's a nice place to escape to for a cup of tea and a read for an hour and not as busy as the other outlets apart from at lunchtime.

HANDOVER

Takes place at 7:30am and 7:30pm for roughly half an hour. At this point all of your care will be handed over to the new midwife coming on shift. Try to avoid asking any questions or trying to find anyone to speak to in this period (unless it is urgent of course) as they will be busy at that point.

MEDICATION

This will be brought to you as prescribed. Normally this will be with breakfast and at dinner but

obviously each person's requirements are different so you may get more or less. Normally this will come in a little pot. If you are someone who thinks about trying to reduce waste, you might want to save the little pots. I have taken them home to use as little paint pots for my other children. There was quite a satisfying stack after 2 weeks!

WARD ROUNDS

You should see a consultant every morning. It won't necessarily be your consultant. Sometimes a large group will come round as there are other doctors and sometimes students who will be accompanying them. This is your opportunity to ask any questions about your care. The round normally starts just after breakfast. I was usually seen by 11am. Don't worry if you miss them, if you need to be seen they will make sure that they see you.

ENTERTAINMENT

You are going to get bored. However, the WiFi is generally pretty good so I was able to watch a lot of Netflix and iPlayer. It's a good idea to download some things before you come in just in case the WiFi plays up.

There were knitting materials in the dayroom if you're so inclined. One of my friends brought a nanoblocks set in for me and I built a miniature Tower Bridge which whiled away a particularly boring afternoon. I also got a little addicted to those puzzle magazines that you normally see old people doing. Any port in a storm!

I tried to get down for a walk around the hospital most days which I would recommend if you're allowed, if only for a change of scenery. There is an interesting little "museum" opposite the governor's hall which tells you some of the history of St Thomas'. There is a staircase there as well that will take you up to the Chapel. Even without any religious affiliation I would recommend it as a quiet place to sit and take stock if you are having a low moment.

Good luck and try to enjoy your stay. It's not fun but it's always for the best and the staff are brilliant.