

Public Consultation on Self-Care and 'Over the Counter' Medicines 17 July 2017 to 28 August 2017

Frequently asked questions

1. What is self-care?

Self-care is about people taking responsibility to protect, maintain and improve their health, wellbeing or wellness. It includes making lifestyle changes around smoking, alcohol, diet and exercise, but it also includes how someone manages any illnesses they have, whether they have a long term condition or just a minor ailment.

Good self-care is very important because it improves someone's health, independence and quality of life. It also reduces the burden on NHS services and finances.

2. What is a minor ailment?

This is a minor illness or condition. Some examples of minor ailments are:

- Acne
- Athlete's foot
- Colds and flu
- Constipation
- Cough
- Hay fever
- Headache
- Nasal congestion

Minor ailments can easily be treated with medicines that can be bought over the counter (OTC) at a pharmacy or supermarket. It's not necessary to make an appointment with your GP to get a prescription for these. Some of these OTC medicines do not have much evidence that they really work, such as cough and cold medicines, so they are not a good use of NHS resources.

Many minor illnesses are "self-limiting" which means they get better by themselves, sometimes with no treatment needed.

3. What is an over the counter (OTC) medicine?

An OTC medicine is a medicine that can be bought from a pharmacy or supermarket. You do not need a prescription for these medicines. Some examples of common OTC medicines are:

- Painkillers, such as paracetamol and Ibuprofen
- Indigestion remedies
- Cough mixtures

- Antihistamine tablets
- Moisturising creams
- Sore throat lozenges
- Multivitamins

4. What is the cost to the NHS of prescribing OTC medicines?

In the 12 months up to May 2016, it cost the NHS across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire around £10 million to prescribe these medicines which are readily available to buy.

5. Is it more expensive for the NHS to prescribe these medicines than it is for someone to buy them?

Yes. Although the NHS works hard to source the most cost-effective medicines, when they are prescribed we have to pay for all the administrative costs involved. For example, we have to pay doctors and pharmacists for their work and cover the cost of prescription pads, medicines bottles and other consumables. We also have to pay the NHS staff who calculate how much money doctors and pharmacists should receive.

When someone buys a medicine OTC instead, the NHS doesn't have to pay these costs, or the cost of the medicine itself. This means that we can then spend that money on treatments and services for other patients.

6. Why are you reviewing the prescribing of OTC medicines?

Prescribing medicines that are available to buy OTC costs the NHS a lot of money. Additionally, a fifth of GP appointments are taken up by minor ailments, costing the NHS nationally an estimated £2 billion a year¹. Reducing these appointments would free up GP time for patients with more serious health problems. The money spent on prescribing these medicines could be reinvested in other treatments and services for patients.

As pharmacies are able to treat these conditions without an appointment, it saves patients time too as they don't need an appointment to see a pharmacist and pharmacies are often open much longer hours than GP surgeries.

Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) have a duty to ensure that NHS money is spent well, so we need to continually look for opportunities to reduce any unnecessary prescribing or waste in the health system.

7. What will the NHS do with the money its saves from this proposal?

Any money we save from this proposal will be reinvested back into other healthcare services and treatments.

8. Will this proposal affect people who don't have to pay for their prescriptions or those with a low income?

No. Patients who need to have medication prescribed will continue to have it prescribed. Under NHS regulations, GPs should prescribe any medicine they feel is needed for a patient's medical care, so if it is appropriate to prescribe it then a GP will. What we want to avoid is people asking for prescriptions for OTC medicines when they don't really need them, because this is a waste of NHS resources. We are not seeking to restrict prescribing entirely, only to ensure it is done so appropriately.

9. Is this proposal safe and fair?

Yes, because anyone who has a genuine clinical need for an OTC medicine will be prescribed it if it is appropriate. Some patients with long term conditions (like chronic pain) actually benefit from taking certain OTC medicines regularly, so these people will continue to receive prescriptions for these medicines. If a child is unwell and has a high temperature, a GP may prescribe paracetamol to treat the symptoms and then encourage the parent to keep a stock of this at home to help treat future illnesses.

Promoting self-care will help people to look after their health and wellbeing, so we are keen to make sure that people know how to access advice about their minor ailments from a community pharmacy. Doing this means that they may be able to start treating their condition sooner because they won't have to wait for a GP appointment.

This proposal will free up vital NHS funds that can then be used for other vital treatments and services.

10. What can I do to help my local NHS?

You can help us by keeping yourself as well as you can. Making lifestyle changes such as stopping smoking, reducing your alcohol intake, eating healthily and doing exercise can really reduce your chances of developing serious medical conditions later.

We recommend that you keep a supply of OTC medicines in your medicine cabinet at home so that you can start treating any minor ailments as soon as you become unwell.

If you feel unwell always speak to your pharmacist first before making an appointment with your GP. Pharmacists have studied at university for five years to become medicines experts and they will be able to advise you on which medication is best for you.

If you would like to read about the different minor ailments and how to treat them, there is a lot of information on the NHS Choices website:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Pharmacy/Pages/Commonconditions.aspx>

References

1. Helping people look after themselves. A guide on self-care. Local Government Association.
<http://www.local.gov.uk/helping-people-look-after-themselves-guide-self-care>