

Over the Counter Medicines – Q & A for patients

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What are over the counter (OTC) medicines?

Over the counter medicines (OTC) are those that can be purchased in a pharmacy, under the supervision of a pharmacist. A limited number of medicines can also be purchased without pharmacy supervision in shops and supermarkets but are often sold in lower pack sizes or lower strengths.

Why are we asking you to buy 'over the counter' medicines for minor ailments, self-limiting conditions and items of low clinical priority.

In 2017 we reviewed how people accessed over the counter medicines for the short term treatment of minor ailments. The sorts of conditions we reviewed included headaches, indigestion, head lice, travel sickness, hay fever, diarrhoea and insect bites and stings.

Then, in March 2018, national guidance was issued by NHS England on "Conditions for which over the counter items should not routinely be prescribed in primary care". This was because, in the year prior to June 2017, the NHS spent approximately £569 million on prescriptions for medicines, which could otherwise be purchased over the counter (OTC) from a pharmacy and/or other outlets such as petrol stations or supermarkets.

As a result, all of the Leicestershire Clinical Commissioning Groups have engaged with their respective populations to understand how people will be affected and, from now on, will be following the same guidance.

We have taken all patient questions, queries and concerns from the review and responded to them and added other information which we think you will find useful. You can read this extra information on the Leicester City CCG website here: <https://www.leicestercityccg.nhs.uk/get-involved/consultations-and-surveys/past-consultations/prescribing-medicine-for-minor-ailments/>

What is included?

These changes apply to

- health conditions which are self-limiting and so do not need treatment, as they will heal or be cured of their own accord
- any minor ailment that is suitable for self-care, which means that medical advice is not normally needed and the person can manage the condition themselves, by purchasing medication directly.

These prescriptions also include other common items

- that can be purchased over the counter, sometimes at a lower cost than that which would be incurred by the NHS
- for which there is little evidence of clinical effectiveness such as probiotics, vitamins and mineral supplements.

What about people who really can't afford to buy medication?

Prescribers will be able to use their own judgement when deciding whether to issue a prescription. We know from our public survey that there are some people who will find it more difficult to buy

over the counter medication. People can always talk to their GP if they have concerns for any reason, because GPs will still be able to prescribe if they think it is necessary.

Why do the prices of OTC medicines vary so much?

Prices of similar preparations vary between pharmacies and it is worth shopping around if you know what you need. Some pharmacies have websites which will tell you the products that they stock and prices.

- Contact a Pharmacy near you. <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/pharmacies/what-to-expect-from-your-pharmacy-team/>
- Compare supermarket prices of some OTC preparations <http://www.mysupermarket.co.uk/>

It may be worth asking your pharmacy if they stock non-branded products which may be cheaper than their branded equivalents.

Will this affect me if I have a pre-paid certificate?

If you have a pre-paid certificate you will also be asked to purchase your OTC treatments for minor ailments. However, if you need regular treatment for a chronic condition, then this will be supplied on prescription covered by your pre-paid certificate.

I have a long-term condition and my GP currently prescribes me with Ibuprofen on a repeat prescription. Do I now have to pay for these?

If you have a long-term health condition and you require regular, long-term treatment for this condition with a medicine, then this will be prescribed for you if your GP thinks you need it - even if it can be purchased OTC. However, unless you require a medicine on a regular basis you will be expected to purchase OTC preparations for minor illnesses like everyone else.

Your GP may also remove some OTC medicines from your repeat prescription if you are not taking them regularly and ask you to purchase it when you need it. You can help by letting your GP practice know if you have over the counter medicines on your repeat prescription and you don't take it regularly.

My son needs antihistamines, nasal spray and eye drops to treat his severe hayfever. These are so expensive to buy over the counter.

This is unfortunate, but you will usually be expected to buy these medicines. However, if there are genuine reasons why you will find this difficult, you can discuss this with your GP because GPs will still be able to prescribe if they think it is necessary.

I am currently prescribed branded tablets and these are very expensive to buy over the counter.

You can ask the pharmacist for an own-brand or generic equivalent of the branded product. If you look at the product license number, you will see that they are often exactly the same product with different packaging and prices.

What if I self-diagnose something that is actually something more serious?

If you have any concerns about self-diagnosis, or if your symptoms do not seem to be improving, you should seek further advice. Pharmacists are highly trained and will be aware of any “red flag” symptoms you have and will advise you what steps to take next. You can also call NHS111 for advice or use the online service 111.nhs.uk

If my illness is left untreated, could it get worse or could it end up more serious?

As in the previous question, if you are in any doubt, there are a number of ways you can get further advice. Check your symptoms by calling NHS111 or use the online service 111.nhs.uk. Talk to your pharmacist, or contact your GP practice.

Can Community Pharmacists diagnose minor ailments?

Pharmacists are highly qualified professionals. They have to complete four years of undergraduate training and one year postgraduate training and also pass a professional exam before they qualify and practice as a pharmacist. Part of this training includes completion of an accredited training programme on minor ailments.

If you are feeling unwell, speak to your community pharmacist as the first port of call. They will be able to recognise symptoms of a minor ailment and offer you advice or treatment accordingly. They will also recognise symptoms are of a more serious or persistent nature and if it is appropriate recommend that you seek further medical advice. However if you are still worried you should make an appointment to see your GP.

You can always call NHS 111, which will help you find the right NHS service.

Can community pharmacists advise me if an OTC medicine will interact with my prescription medicines?

If you are taking medicines prescribed by your GP and you are worried about taking an OTC treatment, a pharmacist will be able to advise you on drug interactions. The pharmacy that dispenses your repeat prescription will be able to check their records of all the medicines that they have supplied you so that they can advise you. Community pharmacists can also view your Summary Care Record which has details of any medicines supplied directly by the pharmacy and also the hospital pharmacy if you are also receiving treatment there.

So, wherever you are, the local community pharmacist will be able to check what medicines you take and advise if you are suitable to take OTC remedies. If they have any queries they will speak to your GP.

You can also be prepared by asking your GP on your next routine visit whether there are any OTC preparations you should avoid.

If I have a long-term condition, can my community pharmacist advise which is the most suitable OTC medicine for me?

Speak to your pharmacist if you have any concerns. They will be able to advise you on the safe use of OTC medicines in the majority of cases. If they need further information that you cannot provide, they will be able to contact your GP surgery or advise you to see your GP if appropriate.

What about vitamins and minerals?

Vitamins and minerals are essential nutrients which most people can and should get from eating a healthy, varied and balanced diet. In most cases, dietary supplementation is unnecessary. It is therefore not deemed appropriate for such preparations to be routinely funded on the NHS. However this does not apply if you are receiving treatment for a medically diagnosed deficiency – if this is the case, you will still be able to get your treatment on prescription.

What if I want to discuss something in private that is intimate or upsetting?

Most community pharmacists have a private room which you can ask to use if you want to discuss an intimate or personal problem. At busy times you may have to wait a little while, but the counter assistant will be able to advise you if this is the case and how long you will have to wait. However, normally it shouldn't be a problem to see the pharmacist reasonably quickly.

Your pharmacist can also talk to you confidentially without anything being noted in your medical records, which some people may prefer.

I can't easily get to my community pharmacy

Most people have access to a community pharmacy within a short distance of their home. However, if you genuinely struggle to get to a pharmacy, then talk to your pharmacist to see if they can help to find a solution.

It is also worth keeping a small supply of some OTC treatments at home in your medicines cabinet so that you have them at hand in the first instance if you don't feel well.

“The quality of OTC medicines is not as good as medicines supplied on a prescription”

This is a myth, OTC meds have the same quality and effectiveness standards as prescription medicines. The quality is regulated by the Medicines and Health Regulatory Authority (MHRA). This means that all licensed medicines bought over the counter must go through detailed safety and quality tests. There should be no noticeable difference in treatment of symptoms between a medicine that you can buy and those supplied on prescription.

I can only buy a small quantity of medicine over the counter

There are restrictions on the quantity of some OTC medicines that you can buy at any one time but these should be enough to manage a minor illness. Larger quantities can be sold by a pharmacy than in supermarkets. Your pharmacist can advise you on what the limits are.

What about administering OTC to small children at school or nursery?

The majority of treatments for minor ailments can be given before the school day starts and last long enough so that another dose does not have to be given until the child returns home. These should

be purchased over the counter. Please don't ask your GP to prescribe paracetamol or ibuprofen "just in case" for this purpose.

This advice does not apply to you if your child receives paracetamol or another analgesic on prescription for long term management of chronic pain. If this is the case please refer to your school's Medicine Policy.

What if an OTC medicine has been started by the hospital?

If you are admitted to hospital, you will be given an adequate supply of medicines when you are discharged which will be free of charge. This may also include medicines for minor ailments if you have been prescribed these during your stay and it is thought that a further supply will help your recovery when you go home. However, if they are not required on a regular long term basis, then they will not be added to your repeat prescription and you will be asked to purchase them in the future.

What if I am in a residential home?

In Leicestershire, Care Homes are expected to provide a limited range of OTC medicines to adult service users who require symptom relief for treatment of headache, back ache or muscular pains, fever, constipation, cough, indigestion and coughs for up to 48hrs. The medicines can be provided without calling out the GP.

However, if there is cause for concern, the care home staff should consult with either their community pharmacist or their GP practice.