

Medicines Optimisation Patient Information Leaflet

Over the counter (OTC) medicines

Why has prescribing of over-the-counter medicines changed?

The NHS is asking healthcare professionals to reduce prescribing of medicines that can be purchased without a prescription. These are known as over the counter (OTC) medicines.

This is because:

- Many OTC medicines are inexpensive and widely available from pharmacies, supermarkets, or opticians.
- By reducing this spending, the NHS can prioritise resources for people with more serious or long-term health conditions.

What does this mean for me?

Your GP, nurse or pharmacist have been requested not to provide a prescription for OTC medicines to treat minor, short-term health conditions.

Examples of conditions where you may be advised to buy treatments include:

- Coughs, colds and sore throats
- Hay fever and allergies
- Dry eyes
- Mild skin conditions
- Indigestion and heartburn
- Constipation or diarrhoea (short-term)
- Sunburn, insect bites or stings
- Minor aches, sprains, headaches and period pain

You will need to purchase suitable medicines from your local pharmacy, supermarket, or opticians.

Are there any exceptions?

In some situations, a prescription may still be appropriate. This includes when:

- You have a complex form of a minor condition (e.g. severe migraine).

- An OTC medicine is needed to treat a side-effect of another prescribed medicine (e.g. constipation when taking certain painkillers).
- A medicine is not licensed for sale over the counter to certain groups (e.g. babies, young children, pregnancy or breastfeeding).
- Your healthcare professional believes that you are unable to self-care due to other health or social reasons.

Your GP, nurse or pharmacist will explain if these circumstances apply to you.

How can my local pharmacy help?

Pharmacists are trained healthcare professionals. They can:

- Offer expert advice about minor health conditions.
- Help you select the right treatment.
- Advise when you should seek further medical help.

You do not need an appointment to speak to a pharmacist.

What can I do?

It can be useful to keep a small stock of common medicines at home, such as:

- Pain relief (paracetamol or ibuprofen).
- Antihistamines (for hay fever or allergies).
- Indigestion remedies.
- Oral rehydration salts for diarrhoea.
- Simple first aid supplies (plasters, antiseptic cream).

If you have children, ask your local pharmacy which products are suitable for them.

Frequently Asked Questions

What if I can't afford OTC medicines?

Most minor health conditions will get better on their own. Your pharmacist can advise you on the most cost-effective treatments, many of which are inexpensive. If you are struggling to afford medicines, please speak with your pharmacist or GP practice team, who may be able to advise on support available.

What if my symptoms don't improve?

Your pharmacy team can tell you how long your symptoms should last. If they do not improve, or if they get worse, you should go back to the pharmacy, call NHS 111, or contact your GP.

What if I already receive free prescriptions?

Even if you do not usually pay for prescriptions, the NHS advises that a short term or minor illness where OTC treatments are sufficient should not be prescribed by your GP, nurse or pharmacist.

What if I have a long-term condition?

If you need regular treatment for a long-term or more serious health condition, your healthcare professional will discuss with you whether a prescription is appropriate for you.

What is Pharmacy First service?

Pharmacy First is a service under which your community pharmacy can help you manage some conditions by suggesting treatment over the counter and if necessary, by offering prescription medicine for some conditions without the need to visit your GP or make an appointment.

These conditions are:

- impetigo (aged 1 year and over)
- infected insect bites (aged 1 year and over)
- earache (aged 1 to 17 years)
- sore throat (aged 5 years and over)
- sinusitis (aged 12 years and over)
- urinary tract infections (UTIs) (women aged 16 to 64 years)
- shingles (aged 18 years and over)

How can I find a pharmacy providing the service?

Community pharmacy provides range of other service and all information on services and how to locate a pharmacy can be found here: [Pharmacies - NHS](#)

Where can I find more information and support?

- NHS website: www.nhs.uk/OTCmedicines
- Your local pharmacy, GP or nurse for clinical advice
- The Patients Association: www.patients-association.org.uk or call 0800 345 7115
- NHS Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care Board (ICB) Patient Experience Team: [Patient experience and complaints :: NHS Hampshire and Isle of Wight](#)
- Email: hiowicb-hsi.patientexperience@nhs.net Or leave a voicemail: 0300 561 2561