

Prescribing of over the counter medicines is changing

Frequently asked questions

What is changing?

Prescribing of over the counter medicines (medicines that can be bought without a prescription) is changing. Following a national public consultation held in 2017, in March 2018 NHS England decided that over the counter items will no longer be routinely prescribed in primary care. This means that doctors, or other prescribers, will not routinely prescribe medicines for minor health conditions that can be purchased over the counter.*

What are the main reasons for the change?

- Minor health conditions are conditions that can be treated through self care. They are conditions that will:
 - Get better on their own
 - Can be treated without visiting the GP by patients buying over the counter items directly
- In most cases the direct cost of over the counter medicines will be lower than the combined cost to the NHS of a GP consultation, buying, prescribing and then dispensing the medicine.
- The NHS currently spends around £136 million a year on prescriptions for medicines for minor health conditions that can be bought from a pharmacy or local shops, such as paracetamol. The NHS is experiencing financial pressures and has a duty to spend tax payers' money wisely and to best effect.

Which conditions are affected by the changes?

Acute sore throat	Conjunctivitis	Coughs, colds and nasal congestion	Cradle cap
Dandruff	Diarrhoea (adults)	Dry eyes / sore tired eyes	Earwax
Excessive sweating	Haemorrhoids	Head lice	Indigestion and heartburn
Infant colic	Infrequent cold sores of the lip	Infrequent constipation	Infrequent migraine

Insect bites and stings	Mild acne	Minor burns and scalds	Mild cystitis
Mild dry skin	Mild irritant dermatitis	Mild to moderate hay fever	Minor pain, discomfort and fever (e.g. aches and sprains, headache, period pain, back pain)
Mouth ulcers	Nappy rash	Oral thrush	Sun protection
Prevention of tooth decay	Ringworm / athlete's foot	Sunburn	Warts and verrucae
Teething/ mild toothache	Threadworms	Travel sickness	

Probiotics, and some vitamins and minerals will also no longer be routinely prescribed, because most people can and should get these from eating a healthy, varied and balanced diet.

Why are medications for these conditions not being prescribed?

The NHS has to make difficult choices about what it spends taxpayer money on and how much value the taxpayer is getting for that money. The NHS has been spending around £136 million a year on prescriptions for medicines that can be bought over the counter from a pharmacy or some local shops.

Every time you see a GP it costs the NHS £36 on average, while a visit to A&E can cost £130. Reducing the non-routine prescription of over the counter medicines will save the NHS money, promote patient self care and alleviate pressure for appointments on GP practices so that more appointments are available for patients with more serious or complex conditions.

How can I get treatments for minor health conditions now?

You can visit your local pharmacist where you can obtain immediate clinical advice and appropriate over the counter medicines. You may also be able to buy some medicines from local shops but you will only be able to get professional clinical advice from a pharmacist from your local pharmacy. You do not need to make an appointment to speak to the pharmacist, just pop in anytime and they will be happy to help you. If your symptoms suggest it's more serious, they will ensure you get the care you need.

What are the benefits of going to the pharmacy instead of making an appointment to see your GP?

Pharmacists have the knowledge and skills to help with many health conditions. You do not need an appointment to speak with a pharmacist and you do not need to register with a pharmacist. This means you can visit any pharmacist and get advice and treatment quickly.

Visiting a pharmacy first helps to make more GP appointments available for patients with more serious or complex health needs. If you have something more serious, the pharmacist is trained to signpost you the right medical care for you.

How much will over the counter medicines cost?

Prices will depend on the medicine. It should usually cost less than it would cost the NHS for the GP consultation, prescribing, dispensing and the cost of the medicine.

Are all local doctors no longer prescribing medication for these conditions?

All prescribers within south west London, including GPs, extended hours, urgent care and A&E departments are stopping the routine prescription of over the counter medicines. Prescribers will use their clinical assessment skills and clinical judgement to assess patients and in exceptional circumstances (using approved exceptions provided by NHS England) may prescribe over the counter medicines if they think this is the most appropriate thing to do for the individual patient.

***Are there any exceptions to the guidance?**

NHS England has issued a number of exceptions to the prescription guidance. These are listed in full in the NHS England guidance to CCGs which can be found on the 'Treating minor health conditions (self care)' page on each CCG website.

You may still be prescribed a medicine for a condition on the list if:

- You need treatment for a long-term condition, e.g. regular pain relief for chronic arthritis or inflammatory bowel disease.
- You need treatment for more complex forms of minor illnesses, e.g. migraines that are very bad and where over the counter medicines do not work.
- You need an over the counter medicine to treat a side effect of a prescription medicine or symptom of another illness, e.g. constipation when taking certain painkillers.
- The medicine has a licence which doesn't allow the product to be sold over the counter to certain groups of patients. This could include babies, children or women who are pregnant or breast-feeding.
- The person prescribing thinks that a patient cannot treat themselves, for example because of mental health problems or severe social vulnerability.

The reasons vary for each condition. Your GP, nurse or pharmacist will speak to you if this affects you.

These are common conditions, isn't it unfair to choose them when lots of people will be affected?

Minor health conditions are conditions that can be treated through self care. They are conditions that will:

- Get better on their own
- Can be treated without visiting the GP by patients buying over the counter items directly

A public consultation was held in 2017 on whether to stop the routine prescription of medicines for these conditions. It was decided that not prescribing for these conditions would lead to better use of NHS resources and encourage patients to self care through the purchase of readily available over the counter medicines. This would enable NHS resources, such as GP appointments, to be increasingly used to treat patients who have more serious or complex conditions.

I usually get prescribed medicine for these conditions from the doctor, what should I do?

The easiest thing to do is to visit your local pharmacy for advice and purchase of the right over the counter medicine for you or a family member. Pharmacists can offer advice on how to manage the symptoms, when to seek further medical advice, and what medicines to take if you are on other medication. You do not need to make an appointment to see the pharmacist and many are open late nights and at the weekend and bank holidays when the doctor's surgery is closed. You may be able to buy some medicines from local shops but you will only be able to get professional clinical advice from a pharmacist at your local pharmacy.

If you have a repeat prescription for these conditions, you should speak with your GP at your next appointment. Prescribers will use their clinical assessment skills and clinical judgement to assess patients and in exceptional circumstances (using approved exceptions provided by NHS England) may prescribe over the counter medicines if they think this is the most appropriate thing to do for the individual patient.

I get free prescriptions, will I still be able to get these medicines with a free prescription?

Patients who receive free prescriptions are not automatically exempt. This means that you will need to purchase over the counter medicines unless your GP assesses that one of the exceptions to the guidance applies to you.

Do I need to make an appointment to see a doctor or nurse if I have one of the conditions listed?

No, minor health conditions can be treated without visiting a GP or nurse. They will get better on their own. You can seek advice and treatment from your local pharmacist who will be able to advise which over the counter medicine is best for you. If the pharmacist assesses you have something more serious, they will signpost you to the right medical care for you.

If your symptoms do not improve or get worse call 111 or visit a doctor.

Do I need a prescription or written consent from a GP for medicine I give to the school / nursery for use with my child?

Non-prescription medicines (over the counter medicines) do not require any written consent from a GP or other healthcare professional to allow school and nursery staff to administer them.

Schools and nurseries can only administer prescription medicines to a child when they have been prescribed by a doctor, dentist, nurse or pharmacist.

All medication must only be administered to a child under the age of 16 where written permission for that particular medicine has been obtained from the child's parent or carer.

Where can I find out more?

The 'Treating minor health conditions (self care)' page on your CCG website has further information and links, including to the NHS England guidance to CCGs.

What do I do now?

We encourage you to buy a range of over the counter medicines that are suitable for you and your family, and to keep them in stock in case of illness. Your local pharmacist will be able to advise which ones are most appropriate for you, you can pop in for advice any time during opening hours – there is no need to make an appointment.

Check your medicine cabinet, or create one, and make sure you have the following basics to hand for when you need them:

- Painkillers such as paracetamol and ibuprofen
- Sore throat, coughs, colds and flu medications
- Heartburn and indigestion remedies
- Anti-diarrhoea and constipation medication
- Antihistamines (for a mild allergy)
- Rehydration salts
- Pile (haemorrhoid) treatment
- Sunscreen
- First aid kit including plasters, bandages, a thermometer and antiseptic cream

What do I do if I have a query or complaint?

As with all concerns, we hope that patients can be reassured at a practice level. However, we recognise that there may be some patients who wish to raise this with the CCG in which case you can write to your CCG PALS/ customer care department.