

Over the Counter medicines

Questions and answers

1. What are over the counter (OTC) medicines?

Over the counter medicines (OTC) are medicines that can be purchased in a pharmacy under the supervision of a pharmacist, or without pharmacy supervision in local shops and the high street.

Self-care using over the counter medicines helps you to look after yourself and your family when you can.

2. Can community pharmacists advise on minor ailments?

Pharmacists are experts in medicines and can provide advice on common minor ailments. To qualify as a pharmacist they have to complete four years of undergraduate training, one year post graduate training and also pass a professional exam.

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 of a more serious or persistent nature and if it is appropriate they will recommend that you seek further medical advice.

3. 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.

A local community pharmacist can discuss with you what prescribed medicines you take and advise you if they are suitable with OTC medicines.

4. Can my community pharmacist advise which is the most suitable OTC medicine for me if I have a long-term condition?

Your local pharmacist will be able to advise you on the safe use of OTC medicines. If they need further information that you cannot provide, they may be able to contact your GP surgery or advise you to see your GP if appropriate.

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

Many community pharmacies have a private room for consultations which you can request to use if you want to talk to the pharmacist in private. You don't need to make an appointment to see your pharmacist, but at busy times the counter assistant may ask you to wait for a few minutes until they are available.

6. I can't easily get to my community pharmacy, what should I do?

Most people have access to a community pharmacy within a short distance of their home, however if you struggle to get to yours then talk to your pharmacist to see if they can help to find a solution. It is also beneficial to keep a small supply of some OTC medicines at home so that you have them to hand when you feel unwell and means you don't have to leave the house.

For more information about keeping a well-stocked medicine cabinet visit:

<https://bsw.icb.nhs.uk/your-health/which-nhs-service-should-i-use/self-care/>

7. Is the quality of OTC medicines as good as medicines supplied on a prescription?

Yes. The quality of medical treatments 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.

8. Can I 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 and your pharmacist can advise you on what the limits are.

9. Will I have to purchase OTC medicines if I have a long term condition?

If you require regular, long-term treatment 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.

10. Why has the guidance been developed?

NHS England recommendations came into place in 2017 regarding prescriptions which can be purchased over the counter from a pharmacy or other outlets. Since then the NHS has reduced its annual spend from **£569** million per year to **£248** million per year on these products, enabling reinvestment in other essential services.

11. How has the guidance been developed?

NHS England completed a period of national consultation in 2017 on items which should be routinely prescribed in primary care – this sought views on the principle of restricting the prescribing of medicines which are readily available over the counter. There was general support for consulting on this proposal, which set out an initial list of 26 minor or self-limiting conditions.

Following a mapping exercise, additional minor conditions were identified and this brought the total number of conditions to 35. This means that for 35 minor, short-term conditions over the counter medicines will not be routinely prescribed.

12. Does this mean the prescribing of over the counter items is banned?

No. It is important to note that the guidance focuses on restricting prescribing for the minor, short term conditions outlined, not on the restriction of prescribing or individual items.

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

13. Will this affect me if I have a pre-payment certificate for my prescriptions?

If you have a pre-payment 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.

14. 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.

15. What if I am in a residential home?

Across BSW, Care Homes may 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 48hours. The medicines can be provided without calling out the GP.