

# Over the Counter (OTC) Medicines Prescribing



Bath and North East Somerset,  
Swindon and Wiltshire  
Clinical Commissioning Group

NHS England has [prescribing guidance](#) which covers 35 minor, short-term health conditions, which are either 'self-limiting' or suitable for 'self-care'.

For these minor, short-term conditions, medicines which are available over the counter (OTC) should not be routinely prescribed on the NHS.

## Introduction

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.

## Over the Counter Medicines Prescribing – Briefing

1. NHS England has detailed [prescribing guidance](#) which covers 35 minor, short-term health conditions, which are either 'self-limiting' or suitable for 'self-care':
  - a. A **self-limiting condition** does not require any medical advice or treatment as it will clear up on its own, such as sore throats, coughs, colds and viruses.
  - b. A **minor illness that is suitable for self-care** can be treated with items that can be purchased over the counter from a pharmacy. These conditions include, for example, indigestion, mouth ulcers and warts and verrucae.

## About the guidance

2. The guidance recommends that, for 35 minor, short-term conditions, medicines which are available over the counter are no longer routinely prescribed.
3. Vitamins, minerals and probiotics are also included in the restrictions as items of limited clinical effectiveness.

## Who is affected?

4. The guidance applies to everyone who is not covered by the general or condition-specific exceptions listed in the guidance document. In relation to the exceptions, it is important to highlight:
  - The guidance does not apply to people with long-term or more complex conditions who will continue to get their usual prescriptions.
  - Applies to all patients, including those who would be exempt from paying prescription charges, or with prepayment certificates, unless they fall under the exceptions outlined
  - For patients where the clinician considers that their ability to self-manage is compromised as a consequence of medical, mental health or significant social vulnerability; these patients will continue to receive prescriptions for over the counter items subject to the item being clinically effective.
  - For the self-limiting conditions, where symptom relief may be required, the general exceptions will only apply where the prescription is for an over the counter item that is clinically effective.
  - For vitamins, minerals and probiotics, only the condition-specific exceptions will apply.

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## Recommended Actions

- All receptionists and triage teams to be aware of list of specified conditions.
- This list should be made visible to all patients and staff.
- Consider revising practice treatment protocols to exclude these conditions and advise OTC purchase via community pharmacy (or other source).

### List of minor illnesses or items for which prescribing is restricted:

Self-limiting illnesses		
Acute sore throat	Conjunctivitis	Mild cystitis
Infrequent cold sores of lip	Haemorrhoids	Infant colic
Coughs, colds & nasal congestion	Cradle cap (seborrhoeic dermatitis – infants)	

Minor illnesses		
Mild irritant dermatitis	Indigestion & heartburn	Head lice
Dandruff	Infrequent constipation	Minor burns & scalds
Diarrhoea (adults)	Infrequent migraine	Mouth ulcers
Dry eyes/sore (tired) eyes	Insect stings & bites	Oral thrush
Earwax	Mild dry skin	Nappy rash
Excessive sweating (hyperhidrosis)	Mild acne	Ringworm & athlete's foot
Prevention of dental caries	Sunburn	Threadworms
Teething & mild toothache	Sunburn protection	Travel sickness
Mild to moderate hayfever & seasonal rhinitis		Warts & verrucae
Minor conditions associated with pain, discomfort and/fever. (e.g. aches and sprains, headache, period pain, back pain)		

Items of limited clinical effectiveness		
Probiotics	Vitamins and minerals	

## Reference

NHS England March 2018. Conditions for which over the counter items should not routinely be prescribed in primary care. Available from:  
<https://www.england.nhs.uk/medicines/conditions-for-which-over-the-counter-items-should-not-routinely-be-prescribed/>

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## This guidance

- Is intended to encourage people to self-care for minor illnesses as the first stage of treatment. It is envisioned that in most cases (unless specified) these minor conditions will clear up with appropriate self-care. If symptoms are not improving or responding to treatment, then patients should be encouraged to seek further advice.
- Applies to all patients, including those who would be exempt from paying prescription charges, or with prepayment certificates, unless they fall under the exceptions outlined.
- GPs and/or pharmacists should refer patients to NHS Choices, the Self Care Forum or NHS 111 for further advice on when they should seek GP Care.

*It is NOT intended to discourage patients from going to the GP when it is appropriate to do so.*

There are however, certain scenarios where patients should continue to have their treatments prescribed and these are outlined below:

- Patients prescribed an OTC treatment for a long term condition (e.g. regular pain relief for chronic arthritis or treatments for inflammatory bowel disease).
- For the treatment of more complex forms of minor illnesses (e.g. severe migraines that are unresponsive to over the counter medicines).
- For those patients that have symptoms that suggest the condition is not minor (i.e. those with red flag symptoms for example indigestion with very bad pain.)
- Treatment for complex patients (e.g. immunosuppressed patients).
- Patients on prescription only treatments.
- Patients prescribed OTC products to treat an adverse effect or symptom of a more complex illness and/or prescription only medications should continue to have these products prescribed on the NHS.
- Circumstances where the product licence doesn't allow the product to be sold over the counter to certain groups of patients. This may vary by medicine, but could include babies, children and/or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Community Pharmacists will be aware of what these are and can advise accordingly.
- Patients with a minor condition suitable for self-care that has not responded sufficiently to treatment with an OTC product.
- Patients where the clinician considers that the presenting symptom is due to a condition that would not be considered a minor condition.
- Circumstances where the prescriber believes that in their clinical judgement, exceptional circumstances exist that warrant deviation from the recommendation to self-care.
- Individual patients where the clinician considers that their ability to self-manage is compromised as a consequence of medical, mental health or significant social vulnerability to the extent that their health and/or wellbeing could be adversely affected, if reliant on self-care.
- Applies to all patients, including those who would be exempt from paying prescription charges, or with prepayment certificates, unless they fall under the exceptions outlined
- Consideration should also be given to safeguarding issues.

(Full document available from <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/otc-guidance-for-ccgs.pdf> and <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/otc-public-faqs.pdf>)