

# Self care for minor ailments

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## SELF CARE – YOU ARE IN CHARGE

7 million UK men live with long term health conditions and the number is steadily increasing. While there may be no cure, new treatments are more accessible than ever before. The trick is to take control over the condition not let it rule you. Knowing where to get advice and support is part of the answer and your body may need expert attention, but day to day maintenance keeps you in charge. It doesn't really matter which long term health condition you may have, there are basic steps you can take to care for yourself and improve your own health and well-being, particularly in terms of confidence, information, kit and support networks.

### *Toolbox skills*

Building up confidence in self care is half the battle, and there are self care courses available. A good example is the 'Expert Patients Programme' run by everyday people for two and a half hours a week over six weeks where you learn about confidence building, stress, diet, pain management, and how to get what you most want from a health or social care professional. National charities also run courses to help people take control of their condition. Ask your local pharmacist, NHS Direct, practice nurse or go onto the web.

### *Be in charge*

People who understand their own health condition are more likely to take medicines correctly, wind up less often in A&E and are more confident to self care.

Information is out there, ask your pharmacist or practice nurse for information to help understand more about your condition, where to get appropriate equipment or assistive technology, what you can do to self care and prevent things getting worse.

### *What's the choice out there?*

Knowing just exactly when to call in the experts is not always obvious and long term health conditions don't always remain the same especially if more than one condition is present. Weather, family situations, financial problems and even feeling fed up can all influence the way you can manage, but seeking advice and support early is always better than waiting until you are out of your depth.

The NHS has a range of services that offer options that allow you to get the right treatment or support, at the right time, at the right place. These services can make life a lot easier so visit [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) or give them a ring on 0845 46 47.

### **Pharmacists: More than just blue bottles**

Pharmacists are highly qualified professionals providing advice on the use and selection of prescription and over-the-counter medicines. Self care is their forte for managing minor ailments and common health conditions. This includes life-style advice for nutrition, physical activity and stopping smoking but they will also direct you to other health and social care professionals or self care providers.

### **NHS Walk-in Centres: A step in the right direction**

Convenient, appointment free and in places where you are. Highly qualified NHS nurses offer a range of services. Good advice, care of minor ailments and injuries, prescriptions and even emergency contraception. Look out for the centres in railway stations, shopping malls or on the high street.

**NHS Direct:  
Direct and to the point**

NHS Direct provides 24 hour confidential health advice and information. Call 0845 4647 or visit NHS Direct Online at [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk); Why not try NHS Direct Interactive on digital satellite TV?

**GPs: Family Care**

General practitioners are available from around 8.30 am to 6 pm. Calling at other times will put you in touch with an out of hours system run by GPs and nurses. Practices now often offer a huge range of services such as minor surgery, skin care, antenatal share care and even clinics for people with diabetes or asthma, once only provided by hospital out patient departments.

**Accident & Emergency**

These hospital departments do best what they say; treating serious accidents or life threatening illness such heart attacks or medical conditions which suddenly become worse. Open 24 hours a day all through the year they tend to be used by people who should really see their GP. Be prepared for a long wait if there are people more seriously ill than yourself.

**Helpful links**

You are not alone. There are local community support groups, networks, faith groups there to support you to look after yourself and your condition. You can meet people who may share the same experiences as you or the same health condition. Libraries, pharmacies, GP surgeries and social service departments can point you in the right direction (see inside the back cover)

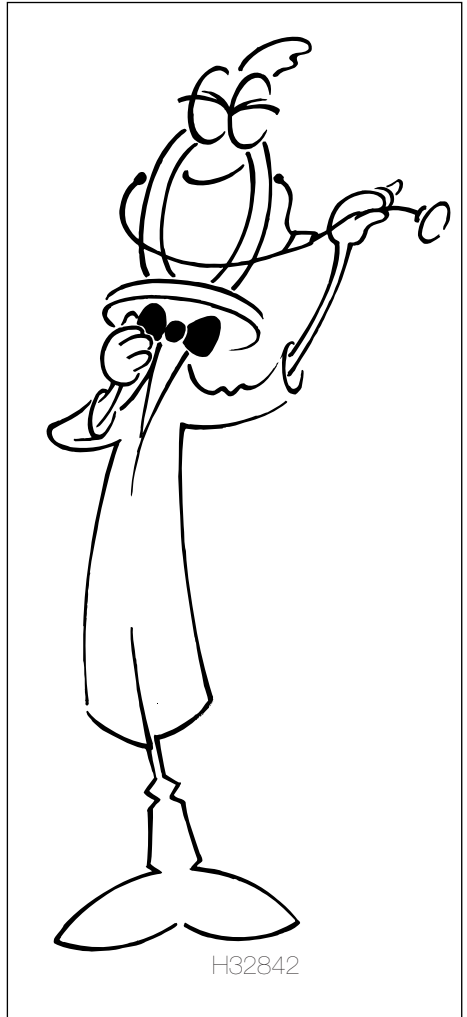
## GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR GP

### *Keep it or Cancel it*

Patients failing to turn up for an appointment cause huge frustration for care professionals not least in concern over why the consultation never took place.

Write down your symptoms before you see your doctor: It's easy to forget the most important things during the examination. Doctors home-in on important clues. When did it start? How did it feel? Has this ever happened before? What have you done about it so far? Are you on any medicines at present?

- Tell the truth: If you have a lump or bump say so. During the consultation you want to get your real problem sorted.
- Ask questions: Don't be afraid to ask your doctor to give more information or make something clear that you don't understand. It helps if the doctor writes down the important points. Most people pick up less than half of what their doctor has told them.
- Have your prescription explained: Ask whether you can buy any medicines across the counter. Make sure you know what they are all for. Some medicines clash badly with alcohol.



## SMOKING

Smoking can lead to all sorts of serious health problems, including heart disease, stroke, various cancers (such as lung, bladder, mouth and throat cancers), bronchitis and emphysema. Our advice is plain and simple: if you smoke, try to give up. If you don't smoke, don't start. On a more positive note, what you may not know is that the very moment you stop smoking, your health will start to improve. Within five years your risk of lung cancer will have dropped dramatically. And your risk may be halved by the time you reach your tenth year of being cigarette-free.

Nobody pretends giving up smoking is always easy, people take up to seven attempts to quit so if you have tried before and failed then don't give up, there are lots of different ways to quit.

### *Useful contacts*

#### **QUIT**

[www.quit.org.uk](http://www.quit.org.uk)

#### **Quitline**

0800 00 22 00

#### **NHS Smoking Helpline**

0800 169 0 169

#### **NHS Asian Tobacco Helplines**

Urdu 0800 169 0 881

Punjabi 0800 169 0 882

Hindi 0800 169 0 883

Gujarati 0800 169 0 884

Bengali 0800 169 0 885

### *Quit plan*

- Talk to your GP, practice nurse or pharmacist. There are products to help you stop.
- Set a day and date to stop. Tell all your friends and relatives, they will support you.
- Always take a buddy. Get someone to give up with you, it reinforces the will power.
- Clear the house and your pockets of any packets, papers or matches.
- One day at a time is better than leaving it open-ended.
- Map out your progress on a chart or calendar. Keep the money saved in a separate container.
- Chew on a carrot. It will help you do something with your mouth and hands and it can help reduce the risk of other serious diseases.
- Ask your friends not to smoke around you. People accept this far more readily than they used to do.

## STRESS

Symptoms: tiredness, mood swings, skin problems, muscle tension, disturbed sleep patterns, low self-esteem, anxiety, poor concentration, changes in eating patterns, poor memory/forgetfulness. People vary in how much stress they can experience before it has an effect on their health.

### *How can I treat stress signals?*

- Exercise has a positive effect on the common symptoms of stress and is useful in helping to prevent stress related ill health.
- Make time for yourself. Relaxation techniques or meditation or prayer can be useful for many people.
- There are many types of relaxation classes available as well as meditation, yoga or Pilates.
- Taking a positive approach to your health can help you avoid turning to food, alcohol or other drugs such as nicotine as comforters when feeling stressed.

### *Self care at work*

Lots of people feel stressed at work and it can be caused by many reasons like feeling you have too much or too little to do, little freedom or flexibility, being unclear about where you fit in the workplace, trying to balance work and home life demands and strenuous work relationships.

Your organisation should support you in finding ways to reduce the causes of work related stress. There are also a number of things you can do for yourself which may help you deal with stress:

- Organise your work – if too much work and too little time is a problem, speak to your manager, if this is difficult you could speak to a staff representative or trade union representative.
- Talk to people both in and outside of work who can support you.

- Change your work environment (eg, list your priorities; develop a filing system).
- Take regular breaks during the day and at lunchtime, avoid long work hours and take proper holidays.
- Exercise – going to the gym, a brisk walk, running or swimming are all good ways to take your mind off things.
- Find out if your company has a counselling or occupational health service and use it.
- If you feel distressed at work – try and take some time-out to calm down and have a break.
- Learn simple relaxation techniques that you can do at work such as deep breathing.

### *Where to get advice*

- Use the occupational health service at work or ask your personnel/human resources department or health and safety representative about your company policy on work-related stress.
- You may find information about relaxation classes at your local library, gym, health centre, in your local paper or on the internet.
- Speak to your GP or call NHS Direct on 0845 4647 (England and Wales only) or NHS 24 in Scotland on 08454 24 24 24 for more advice.

### *Useful contacts*

#### **The Mental Health Foundation**

[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

#### **The Health & Safety Executive**

[www.hse.gov.uk/stress](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress)

**Mind** – [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

Mindinfo 0845 7660 163

**[www.teacherstress.co.uk](http://www.teacherstress.co.uk)**

Advice for teachers on how to prevent and cope with stress.

**Samaritans** – 08457 90 90 90

[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

## MEDICINES

Keep a well-stocked medicines cabinet which can be locked and stored in a dry place (not in the bathroom).

A useful basic list:

- Paracetamol, aspirin\* or ibuprofen.
- These are the three most common remedies for pain, fever & headaches. Aspirin and ibuprofen also have anti-inflammatory properties eg, for strains and sprains.
- Indigestion remedy.
- There are many remedies available to treat indigestion such as antacids for excess acid and remedies to treat symptoms like heartburn, feeling bloated or trapped wind.
- Sunscreen – SPF15 or higher.
- Tweezers and sharp scissors.
- A thermometer.

• Plasters, non-absorbent cotton wool, elastic bandages and dressings for cuts grazes and burns.

\* *Aspirin should not be taken by anyone who has suffered from serious stomach problems such as peptic ulcers, or anyone under 16, except after advice from a doctor or pharmacist*

### Medicines advice

When you are buying medicines for yourself (or others) be prepared to tell the pharmacist:

- What your symptoms are and how long you have had them.
- What treatment, if any, has already been tried.
- What other medicines, either from your doctor or pharmacist, you are taking.
- If you are sensitive or allergic to medicines that you know of.
- Any relevant medical history.

### Ask about your medicines

Here are some questions that you can ask health professionals like a pharmacist or doctor to help you understand your medicines better:

- What does this medicine do?
- How long will I need to use it?
- How and when should I take it?
- Should I avoid any other medicines, drinks, foods or activities when I am taking this medicine?
- What are the possible risks and side-effects – and what should I do if they happen to me?

### Using medicines

- Keep all medicines secure, locked in a cool dry place, and out of the sight and reach of children.
- Always read the label and patient information leaflet before taking medicines and only take the recommended dose.
- Check the expiry date – never use out-of-date medicines, take any out-of-date medicines back to your pharmacist.
- Keep all medicines in their original containers.
- Ask your pharmacist which medicines are appropriate for your symptoms, based on the latest available information.
- Other medicines you are taking or conditions (eg, pregnancy) may affect whether a medicine is suitable for you, always discuss with a health professional to make sure.

## COUGHS, COLDS AND FLU

Symptoms: fever, aches, sore throat, runny nose, blocked nose and cough. Cold and flu symptoms are similar, but flu symptoms are more severe and last longer.

### *Flu vaccination*

The NHS recommends that everyone aged 65+ should have a flu jab each year. You should also consider having a flu jab if you:

- Have bronchitis, asthma, emphysema, heart disease, kidney disease or diabetes.
- Have a weakened immune system from disease or treatment such as HIV or chemotherapy.
- Live in a nursing home, residential home or other long-stay home. If you think you need a flu jab contact your GP surgery.

### *Self care*

The fastest and most effective way to treat colds and flu is with advice from your pharmacist. Colds and flu are caused by viruses. Antibiotics do not work on viruses so will not cure colds and flu.

- Breathing in steam from a hot shower, in the bath or from a basin can help ease a blocked nose, stuffiness and a sore throat. You can also put inhalant drops or aromatic rub or salts in the water for extra relief.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Hot drinks like hot water with lemon juice and honey have a soothing effect.
- Get plenty of rest and avoid strenuous exercise.
- If you don't feel like eating try soup instead.

### *Where to get advice*

- Ask your pharmacist or NHS Direct for advice. Check which medicine is best for you. For example, if you suffer from high blood pressure many decongestants may not be suitable.
- If your cough persists more than a fortnight, you have a lot of yellow or green phlegm, you have pain in your chest or shortness of breath ask your pharmacist or GP for advice, or call NHS Direct.



## COLD SORES

Symptoms: painful raised blisters around the mouth – can take up to 10 days to form and heal. The virus is highly contagious and can be passed on by kissing, touching another person's mouth or other part of their body.

One in four people get recurrent cold sores. Cold sores are caused by the herpes simplex virus and cannot be treated by antibiotics. Many people are carriers of the cold sore virus as it lies dormant. The virus can be triggered by factors such as stress, feeling run down or when fighting off another infection.

### *Self care*

Cold sore creams (containing antiviral agents) are available from your pharmacist. If used early enough, creams can prevent the blister or help it heal more rapidly.

Prevent spread of cold sores by careful attention to washing, especially hands, not sharing towels and by avoiding physical contact.

There is still some concern that cold sores may be linked to genital herpes. If in doubt over having cold sores you should use a condom or oral barrier (ask your pharmacist).

## MOUTH ULCERS

Symptoms: painful, white blisters within the mouth or on the tongue.

Unlike cold sores, mouth ulcers are not caused by the herpes virus and are thought to occur for a wide range of reasons from friction on dentures to stress, bacterial or fungal infection, lack of sleep, feeling run down and/or essential nutrient deficiency.

### *Self care*

There are a number of gels available that

contain antiseptics or antibacterial agents combined with pain relief ingredients that can help your mouth ulcer.

Ulcers can be caused by a diet lacking essential vitamins. Ask your pharmacist for advice if for instance you are eating a very strict vegetarian diet possibly lacking in Vitamin B12.

Ulcers can also be a sign of ulcerative colitis and oral cancer, so if recurrent you should get them checked out.

## HEADACHES, FEVER AND HANGOVERS

Symptoms: stabbing or throbbing pain. Headaches can have a whole variety of causes including even looking at a computer screens, or dehydration caused by alcohol.

### *Self care*

The most common remedies for pain relief are ibuprofen, aspirin\* and paracetamol. These pain relief drugs are called analgesics. These remedies will also reduce a high temperature.

If you use a computer at work take a break regularly to avoid eye strain.

Stress too may be causing your headaches – refer to the stress section to find ways of combating this.

Hangover headaches are largely caused by dehydration due to alcohol and insufficient fluid. The most effective cure is prevention by drinking plenty of water, perhaps substituting water for some alcoholic drinks while you are out and by ensuring you get plenty of fluids the next day. Drinking water before you go to bed may help.

The recommended pain relief for the 'classic hangover' the next day is

paracetamol. Other analgesics can irritate what might already be a sensitive stomach. However, you should not mix any alcohol or analgesics on the same night.

There are also products specifically designed for hangovers in an effervescent form which provide headache relief, rehydration and replacement of electrolytes.

If you are suffering from a headache for more than a few days or on a frequent basis speak to your doctor or call NHS Direct for more advice.

*\* Aspirin should not be taken by anyone who has suffered from serious stomach problems such as peptic ulcers, or anyone under 16, except after advice from a doctor or pharmacist*

### *Useful contacts*

#### **Alcohol Concern**

[www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk)

#### **Drinkline**

0800 917 8282

#### **Alcoholics Anonymous**

National Helpline: 0845 769 7555

[www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)

### *The recommended weekly alcohol limits*

- 21 to 28 units per week for men.
- 14 to 21 units per week for women.

One unit of alcohol is roughly equivalent to half a pint of normal strength beer, or a small glass of wine, or one pub measure of spirits. Check the bottle or can to see how many units there are in it. All this should be spread out over the week, so don't kid yourself that sticking to the limit but drinking it all in one go is somehow being healthy!

Similarly, if you regularly go over this amount, then you should think about cutting down your alcohol intake. Apart from all the things you can get up to when you're drunk, your body will suffer long-term if you put too much alcohol in it. Your liver, stomach, throat, kidneys and heart can all suffer from long term alcohol use (or abuse).

## SICKNESS AND DIARRHOEA

Sickness (nausea) and diarrhoea is not usually a sign of anything serious. They are generally caused by a bug, something you've eaten or just too much food or alcohol. Some people also suffer sickness while travelling.

### *Self care*

There are a range of remedies you can buy to help ease nausea, relieve travel sickness and in some cases relieve diarrhoea. Speak to your pharmacist for advice.

- Do not eat food or take painkillers until the sickness has stopped.
- If suffering from diarrhoea try not to ingest rich food or caffeine.
- Drink water little and often, even if it does not stay down for long. Keep your fluid intake up as this will help stop you getting dehydrated.

- Sickness and diarrhoea should stop in 24 hours and then you can start introducing foods again but try not to overload your stomach too quickly.  
Ask your pharmacist, doctor or call NHS Direct if:
  - You are vomiting or have diarrhoea repeatedly and/or it does not settle down in 24 hours.
  - There is blood in your vomit or stools or dark brown/black matter in your vomit.
  - You have had a head injury in the preceding 24 hours and are sick.
  - Your sickness is accompanied by a very high temperature, severe headache, abdominal, neck or back pain and/or bright light bothers you and you feel drowsy or confused.
  - You are on medication and regularly feeling nauseous as this may be a side effect from your medication.

## CONSTIPATION

Constipation is often caused by lack of dietary fibre or not drinking enough fluids. Sometimes it can also be caused by medicines you are taking (eg, codeine), hormonal changes or stress.

Changes in bowel habit such as intermittent constipation followed by diarrhoea, or the other way round, which you have never experienced before need to be checked out. Bowel cancer is unfortunately common but very treatable when caught early.

### *Self care*

Make sure your diet includes plenty of wholegrain, and starchy food such as cereal and bread (18 to 30g a day), and at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables.

- Drink plenty of fluids – at least 7 glasses a day not including tea/coffee.
- A number of laxatives are available over the counter that will stimulate your bowel movements, ask your pharmacist for the best type to suit you. Keep active to encourage bowel activity.
- If laxatives do not work, or you have lower abdominal pain or other symptoms such as persistent vomiting, weight gain or loss and tiredness speak to your GP or call NHS Direct.



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## INDIGESTION

Symptoms: burning pain in the chest which goes into your throat, bitter taste in the mouth, bloated or gassy stomach, general stomach discomfort, too much wind.

Many of us are familiar with that feeling of bloating, discomfort or even pain after we've overdone it with food or drink. Indigestion (or dyspepsia) is any symptom or collection of symptoms caused by disruption of the body's digestive system. Almost everyone will experience the symptoms of indigestion some people will suffer symptoms every day and others only occasionally.

### *Self care*

- Avoid spicy, fatty or large meals, especially just before bedtime.
- Put an extra pillow under your head at night as it is harder for the acid to flow uphill.
- Your pharmacist can advise you on the range of remedies available, like antacids which treat symptoms. Speak to your GP or call NHS Direct if:
- Symptoms suddenly get worse, are not relieved by medication, persist longer than one week or if they come back when you stop taking your medicine.
- There are other symptoms such as weight loss, vomiting, blood in or black stools.
- It is difficult to swallow or it feels like food sticks in your throat when you swallow.
- There is shortness of breath, wheezing or coughing.
- There is a severe pain in your back, throat, ear, chest or neck.
- You have ever had surgery on your stomach, a stomach ulcer, bleeding in your stomach or intestine, or you have anaemia.

## BURNS & SCALDS

Burns are caused by dry heat, such as hot objects, the sun or flames, and scalds are caused by steam, hot liquid or hot fat.

### *Self care*

The urgent priority for burns or scalds is to cool the injury by getting it under cold water as soon as possible and holding it there for at least ten minutes. Remove any jewellery, belts or shoes (in case of swelling) in the case

of a moderate to severe burn. Cover the burn with a sterile dressing. Do not:

- Break blisters.
- Apply any creams.
- Touch the burned area.

If you have a minor burn, ask your pharmacist for ointments that are available to provide soothing relief.

If you have a severe burn or severe sunburn, or have a chemical or electrical burn or injury to the eyes contact your local Accident & Emergency department.

## BACK PAIN

Most acute back pain (pain which goes on for a limited time) is caused by muscle or ligament strain which is often a result of poor posture (both standing and sitting), bad lifting technique, lack of fitness or being overweight, and over-stretching or overuse of your back muscles.

Even when there is a lot of pain it is unlikely that it is caused by anything more serious, like infection, because this is relatively rare. Most pain will lessen within two to three days.

### *Self care*

During the first day or so of back pain, take it easy. Try not to bend forwards, try not to strain yourself or sit in a chair for long periods of time. Take pain killers regularly such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. You may wish to apply a heat or ice pack to the area for 30 minutes at a time. Wrap ice packs in a tea towel first.

You should try to get up and about, moving around won't do your back any harm even if it hurts – in fact you get better faster by keeping as active as possible. Lying in bed will not help, it will make it worse.

Carry out normal activities, but try not to

overdo things. Pace yourself and you will be able to do much more.

You may wish to seek help and advice from someone who deals with back pain all the time, such as a physiotherapist, osteopath or chiropractor.

If your back pain is due to muscle spasm you can usually manage it yourself with advice from your pharmacist or NHS Direct without having to visit your GP. Your GP is likely to advise you to improve your posture and lifting technique, take pain killers such as paracetamol and may offer you exercise routines.

If you have back pain with any of the following symptoms you should go to your GP or call NHS Direct immediately:

- Numbness or pins and needles in one or both legs or around your back passage, genital area, or inside the tops of your thighs.
- Incontinence (bladder or bowel) or are unable to pass water.
- Unsteadiness on your feet or both legs feel weak.
- Feel generally unwell, or a high temperature as well as severe back pain.
- Weight loss or night sweats.
- Your back pain is getting worse over a period of time (more than 4 weeks).