

Information leaflet on over-the-counter medicines

GPs in Hertfordshire will no longer normally prescribe medicines which can be bought over-the-counter for short-term conditions and minor ailments.

What are short-term conditions and minor ailments?

Short-term conditions tend to improve on their own without a long-term effect on a person's health. Minor ailments are uncomplicated conditions which can be diagnosed and managed without seeing the doctor. Some examples of these include: coughs, colds and sore throats; colic; threadworms; verrucas; warts; acne and indigestion.

What are over-the-counter medicines?

Over-the-counter (OTC) medicines can be bought directly without a prescription from a high street pharmacy, supermarket or other shops and online. Some examples include: paracetamol and ibuprofen; antihistamines; eye drops to treat allergies and indigestion treatments.

Why will over-the-counter medicines no longer be routinely prescribed?

We recently reviewed our policy to prescribe OTC medicines following a consultation with the public during July to September 2017, on stopping the routine prescribing of these medicines. The majority of people who responded to our consultation supported this proposal.

The NHS spends valuable financial resources and doctors' time on prescribing medicines and other products that you can buy without a prescription. In 2016, the NHS in Hertfordshire spent over £4 million on providing these items on prescription. With this money, we could have funded:

- 1,000 hip replacements
- 1,300 knee replacements
- 250 drug treatments for breast cancer
- 160 more community nurses
- 300,000 more drug treatments for Alzheimer's disease

As our local population continues to grow, this prescribing places more pressure on scarce NHS resources. Medicines can be bought from shops or pharmacies after seeking appropriate advice from a healthcare professional. Significant savings can be made by not taking up a GP appointment for the supply of an OTC medicine and should also increase the availability of appointments for patients with more serious conditions.

In order to fund services of the greatest need in Hertfordshire, we need to make sure that public money is being used in the most cost effective way. Reducing the prescribing of OTC medicines is also now part of the NHS England agenda. Many CCGs around the country are restricting or stopping the prescribing of OTC medicines on the NHS. It is not just the cost of the medicines which could be a saving but also NHS costs for the entire process (including GP time for an appointment).

If you are no longer prescribing over-the-counter medicines, where can I get these medicines from?

Medicines can be purchased from community pharmacies and / or supermarkets. These often have long opening times so you can get your medicines quickly and treat your condition early, rather than having to wait for a GP appointment. This also saves valuable GP time and your own time too – it is much quicker to pop into your local pharmacy than wait for a GP appointment.

The range of medicines available to buy is increasing and community pharmacists are experts who are best placed to give advice on the right product for you to use. You may find it helpful to keep a small supply of medicines at home for use, such as painkillers for headaches and remedies for colds and sore throats.

The NHS Choices website also contains a lot of useful information on a range of minor ailments (such as constipation, short-term pain, strains and sprains), which you can manage yourself. Please visit <https://www.nhs.uk/pages/home.aspx>.

If your problem is more serious and needs the attention of a GP, your pharmacist will recognise this and advise you to see your GP.

I am exempt from paying prescription charges or my child is under 16 years old and normally gets their prescriptions free. How does this affect me?

This policy applies to all people living in Hertfordshire, including those people who get their prescriptions free. This includes:

- People with a medical / maternity exemption
- Children under the age of 16 years and adults over the age of 60 years (in the case of children, it is the parent / guardian / carer responsibility to purchase these medicines)
- People receiving income-related support

I am being treated with these medicines for a long-term condition and taking them

regularly, do I need to buy them?

People who need medicines for a long-term condition will still be able to get them with a prescription. This policy only applies to the use of medicines and products for short-term conditions. Your GP will continue to prescribe items you need for your long-term condition.

For example: Paracetamol for short-term pain relief and headaches should be purchased. Paracetamol used in the long-term management of chronic pain needing two tablets four times a day regularly, may be prescribed.

I have been to my pharmacist to buy a particular type of medicine but they will not sell it to me. What do I do?

There are some circumstances when pharmacists might not sell you a medicine. For example:

- When a product is not licensed for sale for your intended use
- When a product is not appropriate for you, or could cause you harm
- There are restrictions on the amount that can be sold and you are asking for too much of the product

If this happens, please speak to your GP and if they think you still need the item, they may issue you with a prescription at their clinical discretion.

For more information you can contact us on hvccgpatientfeedback@nhs.net or visit our website at www.hertsvalleysccg.nhs.uk.