

Why better self-care is good for people

Self-care is about health decisions that people make for themselves and their families to get and stay fit – both physically and mentally. This includes taking care of minor ailments as well as avoiding health hazards, such as smoking or drinking too much alcohol. But better self-care also includes exercising and eating well to prevent illness in the future. So being able to self-care directly benefits individuals, their families and society. Advantages of better self-diagnosis and self-care include:

Saving people time and money Having to take a day off work or organise child care to see a GP or other health professional for a health problem can make life difficult for people. By being able to self-diagnose and self-care appropriately, people can often save themselves a lot of time and hassle. Self-care is suitable for both self-limiting as well as long term conditions, such as diabetes, depression, hypertension or back pain. Pharmacists are an excellent resource to help with self-care too.

Giving individuals a feeling of control Like tackling simple computing problems, changing a fuse for a plug, looking after your bike or performing simple car maintenance tasks with just a little basic knowledge and confidence, there's no reason why people can't safely diagnose and treat many common medical problems themselves.

Enabling people to learn what to do and where to find trusted information rather than going – and waiting to see – a health professional for every health problem can feel liberating. It also increases people's resilience and gives a feeling of 'being in control'.

Reducing anxiety Not knowing what a symptom may mean and what to do about it can make people feel anxious. And so deciding whether to seek medical help or not can be challenging. In these situations, being able to self-diagnose appropriately and manage certain health symptoms is greatly reassuring – as is being confident about deciding when it's best to seek medical help. For long term conditions, having care pathways and care plans developed in conjunction with a clinician can further enhance this so that people know what they can do to help themselves and when to seek help.

Improving quality of life Being able to self-manage symptoms such as cough, fever and minor aches and pains improves people's quality of life - which is often all they want and need. Research shows that better self-care, for example, improves sleep and reduces disability from headache. This also makes people feel more positive and confident about their own abilities to take control of their lives and improves their feelings of self worth. By supporting people in this way there can be the added advantage of making sure that people know when they must see a healthcare professional and avoid late detection of serious diseases, which is particularly pertinent for men, who are more prone to presenting later.

Improving disease outcomes People with long-term conditions who can recognise when their condition is worsening and what to do when that happens face less risk of suffering serious complications. Early and appropriate early self-care interventions (such as stepping up treatment in worsening asthma, using 'rescue packs' containing antibiotics and steroids for exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), or adjusting insulin doses in poorly controlled diabetes) can prevent potentially serious complications. There is good evidence that better self-care reduces hospital admissions and disability.

A word about self-diagnosis...

To self-care effectively, people need to be able to self-diagnose. This involves identifying commonly occurring medical conditions (such as headlice, thrush, coughs and colds, or hay fever) – and deciding whether a symptom is likely to be serious or not. To help with deciding whether it's safe to self-care, individuals need to have at least a basic knowledge about such problems. It is also essential that this information is ready to hand within the community and through every NHS outlet, so that people can be supported to become more confident in their everyday healthcare. This is even more important for future generations, and so there must be education in schools to foster the much needed culture which encourages people's practice of self-care as a lifelong habit. To avoid inappropriate decisions based on misdiagnosis, the Self-Care Forum strives to provide the public with high quality and relevant information for safer self-diagnosis and self-care.