

19<sup>th</sup> December 2012

**People need to know they can self treat their coughs, colds  
and sore throats –antibiotics won't help**

A study published in the Lancet today has found that antibiotics are ineffective in treating patients with coughs caused by mild chest infections.<sup>1</sup> This provides further evidence that most coughs and colds can be self-treated and there is no need to visit the doctor to request unneeded antibiotics.

Helping patients to understand just how long the symptoms of coughs, colds and sore throats can go on for is key. In line with NICE guidelines<sup>2</sup>, the length of time that illnesses last for on average is ear infection (4 days), sore throat (1 week), common cold (1½ weeks), sinusitis (2½ weeks), cough or bronchitis (3 weeks).

Dr Pete Smith, GP in Kingston-upon-Thames comments: "Antibiotics don't work in the treatment of coughs, colds and sore throats and evidence shows that coughs last 3 weeks, and sore throats a week, no matter what we do. If we prescribe antibiotics people keep coming back for them resulting in ineffective treatments being prescribed."

Gopa Mitra, PAGB and Self Care Forum Board member notes: "There is good evidence that people tend to give up self care and seek the advice of a doctor within typically a period of 4-7 days, which is often too early for GPs to tell if the symptoms are more serious."<sup>3</sup>

Dr Smith believes that people need to be given information about how long these symptoms normally last for and has devised some simple messages (of 140 characters or less as used on Twitter) for GPs to use in consultations. He calls them his 'tweetments' and has started with the two most common ones for use during the winter season; cough and sore throat<sup>4</sup>. "I am already using them and my patients like them. They get the reassurance they were looking for and learn what to do next time."

**-ENDS-**

The Self Care Forum is a network of doctors, nurses, patient groups, NHS managers, pharmacists, the Department of Health and the OTC medicines industry. The purpose of the Self Care Forum is to further the reach of self care and embed it into everyday life.

**Visit the Self Care Forum website at: [www.selfcareforum.org](http://www.selfcareforum.org)**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473309912703006/fulltext>

<sup>2</sup> NICE short clinical guideline on reducing antibiotic prescribing for respiratory tract infections cites the usual natural history of the illness and average total illness length as sore throat: one week; common cold: one and half weeks, sinusitis: two and a half weeks; cough: three weeks." <http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG69ORG.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Kantar Health, Understanding stakeholder attitudes towards self care, 2009 (commissioned by PAGB (Proprietary Association of Great Britain))

<sup>4</sup> Cough tweet: '90% of coughs last up to 3 weeks and will not be helped by antibiotics unless you are elderly, very ill or have another health condition' – 138 characters

Sore throat tweet: 'Most sore throats will last up to 7 days and will clear without antibiotics. Paracetamol or ibuprofen and fluids are the best treatment' – 138 characters including spaces