

Take care – of yourself and the NHS



Introduction

Despite intense pressure on GP services¹ and warnings that NHS services are “near to collapse,”² millions of Britons are booking appointments with their doctors or attending accident and emergency departments (A&E) for minor health problems for which they could seek self-care pharmacy advice and treat themselves.

2 in 5 adults  have asked for a GP appointment for a minor health issue

New research from PAGB, the consumer healthcare association has revealed **two in five adults (39%)** have requested a GP appointment for minor health issues including colds, a blocked nose, insect bites and stings or headaches.³

 **53%** of patients seen by a GP told to use over-the-counter medicines

The research identifies problems with our health system and consumer awareness and confidence around self-care, as more than half (53%) the patients who secure an appointment with their doctor are then told to use an over-the-counter medicine.

 **8%** of people are going to A&E for relatively minor conditions, like head lice

A smaller, but still significant number of people (8%) are going to A&E departments for dandruff, acne, head lice and other non-urgent and relatively minor health conditions.

Patients presenting at A&E for minor conditions is in part due to challenges around getting a GP appointment. Dr Adrian Boyle, president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, says, ‘Many of my patients have tried not to come to A&E and have tried all other routes before attending.’

Michelle Riddalls, CEO of PAGB, the consumer healthcare association notes: “We know that there are already long waits for GP appointments and A&E departments, and it will only get worse as the number of doctors working in general practice continues to fall and we approach another winter surge in viral and bacterial infections, including flu, coughs and colds.

“Giving people the tools, they need to self-care for self-treatable conditions, and raising awareness of the specialist support that community pharmacists can provide is essential if we are to protect and support the NHS from further pressure, and help make sure GP and emergency services can prioritise those with the most serious health needs.

Michelle Riddalls says,




“Despite the challenges around getting GP appointments, too many consumers still seem to see their doctor’s surgery as the go-to default, and not the precious resource that it is...”

“After years of campaigning and signposting the many benefits of self-care – for both patients and the health service – we are making progress. We are delighted that many of the recommendations in our self-care strategy blueprint around empowering patients and providing more tools to help people manage their own health are being taken forward in the NHS England *Delivery plan for recovering access to primary care*. This is a huge step forward.

“Despite the challenges around getting GP appointments, too many consumers still seem to see their doctor’s surgery as the go-to default, and not the precious resource that it is. It’s really important that consumers are educated in where to find reliable self-care resources, so they have the knowledge and confidence to manage minor conditions themselves and know when a problem is serious enough to require the help of a GP or A&E.”

The new data also reveals some telling insights into consumer perceptions of self-care and the conditions they see as ‘self-treatable’. 69% define them, correctly, as, “Any minor conditions or symptoms that you can treat without having to speak to a GP”. However, one in five (20%) of the consumers who were quizzed on their attitudes to self-care believe that the definition of a self-treatable condition is, “When you can’t get an appointment with a GP and you have to care for yourself.” Demonstrating further, the need for greater health education and awareness of how-to self-care.

 **96%** of people experienced at least one self-treatable condition in the past year

Self-treatable conditions are incredibly common. Consumers were asked about 40 specific conditions which can be addressed using over-the-counter products, including those provided under the supervision of a pharmacist, and almost all (96%) had experienced at least one of these usually minor health issues in the previous year.

On average, those who took part in the survey have experienced at least five self-treatable conditions in the previous 12 months. Four in five (81%) confirmed that their partner or a child had also experienced a self-treatable condition.

There was not a single one of the 40 conditions listed where some consumers had not sought advice from a GP, Pharmacist, and adviser to PAGB, Mark Burdon says, “For something like a suspected urinary tract infection or erectile dysfunction (ED), it may be that consumers are not aware that a pharmacist can provide advice and relevant medicines such as ED therapies.

“Given how rapidly the role of community pharmacy is expanding, and the growing number of medicines which are being switched from prescription-only to over-the-counter sale, with supervision by a pharmacist, it’s understandable that there may be some gaps in awareness.

“But the fact that people are still seeking GP appointments for colds, headaches and even cold sores shows we have to keep hammering home the message that self-care is the ultimate win-win.

“For consumers, it is much quicker and easier to get advice from a community pharmacist, or the NHS via the website, app or 111 telephone line than it is to chase their GP surgery for an appointment. This frees appointments for patients with the greatest need and ensures much better use of NHS resources.”

This report details the latest data on self-care and explores the challenges and benefits of patients taking a more proactive approach to care for common health conditions.

Michelle Riddalls says,

“We need action from the Government to ensure consumers have the confidence in self-care and are willing to use community pharmacists and NHS portals as their initial go-to when they need extra support or advice.”

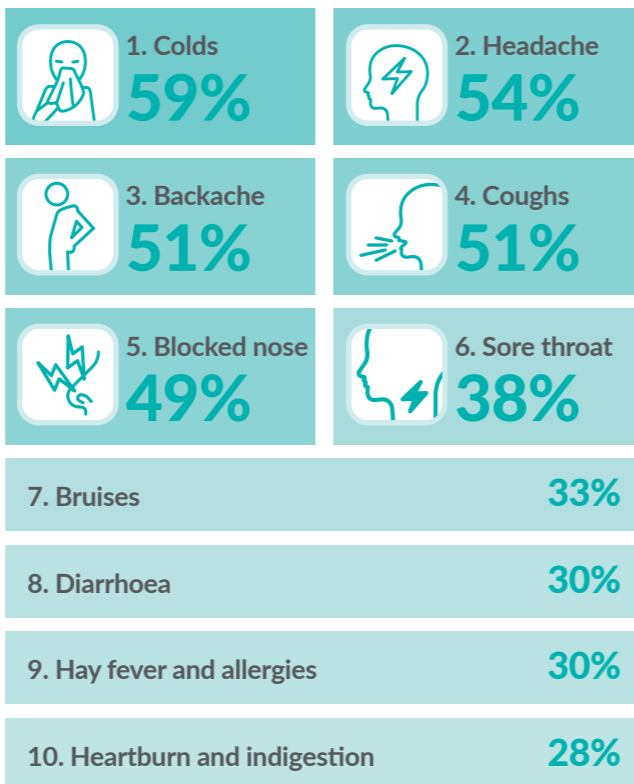
SECTION 1: What ails us?

Analysis by Frontier Economics published earlier this year estimated that 33 million people in the UK experience at least one self-treatable health problem every year. This PAGB report provides granular detail on the most common minor ailments and injuries and how we handle them.⁴

Unsurprisingly, the common cold is the most frequent self-treatable condition consumers experienced in the previous year – with 59% confirming they had suffered at least one infection personally and 49% reporting that a partner or child had experienced a cold.


However, GP and adviser to PAGB, Dr Binita Kalaria says, “This may be skewed by the fact that we are probably more likely to recall our own episodes of illness than to remember when a family member was ill. It’s normal for a young child to have eight or more colds a year, as they slowly build up immunity to the multiple viruses they encounter.”⁵

The top ten common self-treatable conditions consumers had experienced in the previous year and named in the latest PAGB real-world data are:




Looking at the data for all 40 common conditions covered by the survey

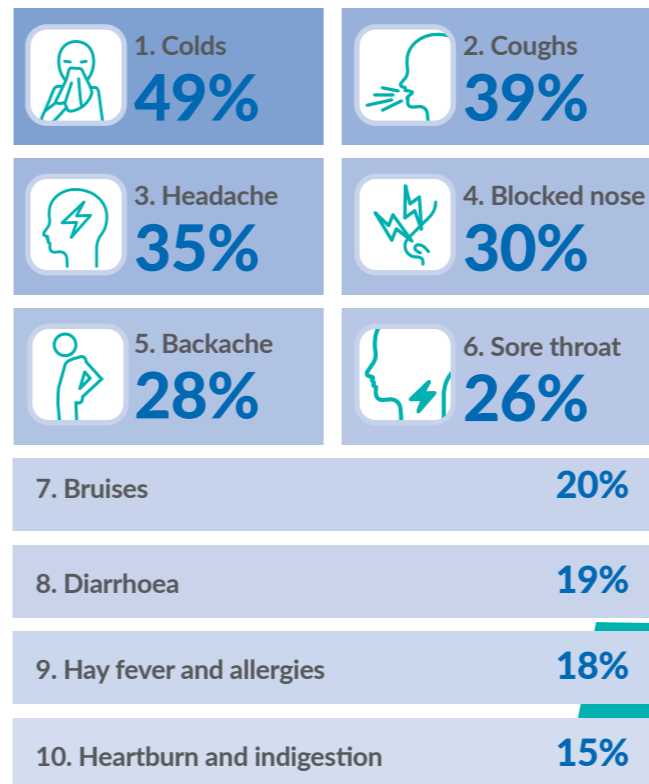
 **2 in 5** sought advice from their GP and

 **8%** went to an accident and emergency department.⁶

 **30%** Of those who tried to get a GP appointment said it was difficult to do so.

 **5%** Trying to get a GP appointment reported they could not even get through to their surgery

And the top self-treatable conditions respondents could recall their partners or children having in the previous 12 months are:



Looking at the data for all 40 common conditions covered by the survey, two in five people (39%) sought advice from their GP and 8% went to an accident and emergency department.⁶ Of those who tried to get a GP appointment, 30% said it was difficult as there were no appointments for several days and one in 20 (5%) reported they could not even get through to their surgery.

A deeper dive into the data shows that 4% of the consumers who had suffered a cold had sought advice or treatment from their GP and 1% had gone to A&E. On the plus side, three in five (56%) consumers had cared for themselves using OTC medicines and 9% had asked their pharmacist for advice.⁷

When it came to headaches, 4% of consumers tried to see a GP and 1% attended A&E, while two-thirds (68%) used OTC medicines to treat their symptoms themselves.⁸ And for backache, 17% sought advice or treatment from their GP and one in 50 (2%) attended an emergency department.⁹

Yet, Mark Burdon points out,

“In the vast majority of these cases there will have been no need for a GP appointment, let alone a trip to A&E. Most of these conditions will resolve themselves within a day or two and need nothing more than rest, fluids and symptom relief.”

SECTION 2: Care contradictions

The data collected highlights differences in consumers' approach to self-care and demonstrates which self-treatable conditions people feel both more and less confident in treating. For example, more people requested a GP appointment or attended an emergency department with conjunctivitis than they did for a sprain or strain.

A quarter of those with conjunctivitis requested a GP appointment and 6% attended an emergency department with a sticky-eye problem, in comparison 9% of those who had suffered a muscle strain or sprain tried to see their GP and a mere 7% attended A&E.


Similarly, more people asked for a GP appointment or attended A&E for warts or verrucas (11% and 3% respectively) than for constipation (10% and 1%). Community pharmacist and adviser to PAGB, Deborah Evans says "Warts and verrucas are unsightly, but they are harmless and often go away in time of their own accord. There is also a range of effective OTC treatments available.

"But if constipation is prolonged, it can be a sign poor diet, lack of hydration, anxiety and other issues which need to be addressed. Persistent constipation also increases the risk of developing haemorrhoids and faecal impaction, where dry, hard stools build up in the rectum.¹⁰

"This is a good example of the need for better education around self-care, so that people know which conditions they can easily care for themselves, and which ones might need further investigation if they persist, if there are other red flag symptoms which might suggest a more serious problem."

However, the data shows that some health messages are hitting home. As noted earlier, colds were the most commonly reported self-treatable condition, with two in three (59%) confirming they had suffered at least one cold in the previous year. Yet only 4% of respondents sought advice or treatment from their GP and more than half - 56% - used OTC medicines to manage their symptoms.

A similar picture emerges for headaches, which have been an issue in the previous 12 months for just over half (54%) of those surveyed, though only 4% had turned to their GP for help and seven in 10 (68%) opted to self-care using OTC medicines.



53% of respondents that experienced a urinary tract infection (UTI) went to their GP for treatment with a further **4%** attending A&E.

The data also highlights the conditions where more education and awareness are needed. For instance, more than half (53%) of the respondents who had experienced a urinary tract infection (UTI) went to their GP for treatment and another 4% attended A&E. Yet a growing number of pharmacies offer a UTI management service and can provide advice on reducing the risk of recurrent infections.



Here is a breakdown of consumer behaviour showing which self-treatable conditions they would feel comfortable treating by themselves:



Dr Binita Kalaria says,

"Having this level of detail about the conditions where consumers are confident to self-care, and those where they are unnecessarily seeking advice from the GP or attending A&E can be used to inform awareness campaigns to ensure we focus on the health messages that are most likely to influence health behaviours."

SECTION 3: Avoidable appointments

While consumers may be seeking GP appointments in the hope of being offered a prescription medicine, PAGB data shows that in the vast majority of cases they will be advised to take an OTC remedy.

Michelle Riddalls agrees and points out, “Booking a GP appointment, rather than opting for self-care, or asking a pharmacist for advice simply prolongs the time patients are having to put up with symptoms and increases pressure on the NHS.”

Every one of these consultations is estimated to cost the NHS £42, while the cost of a trip to A&E starts at £86.¹¹

Mark Burdon says, “Over the years various think tanks and politicians have suggested that patients are given a mock bill when they see their GP, so they realise that while the service is free, it still has to be paid for through taxation.¹³

“I’m not convinced that’s the answer, but there is certainly an argument for reminding people that anything which takes pressure off the NHS will benefit us all.

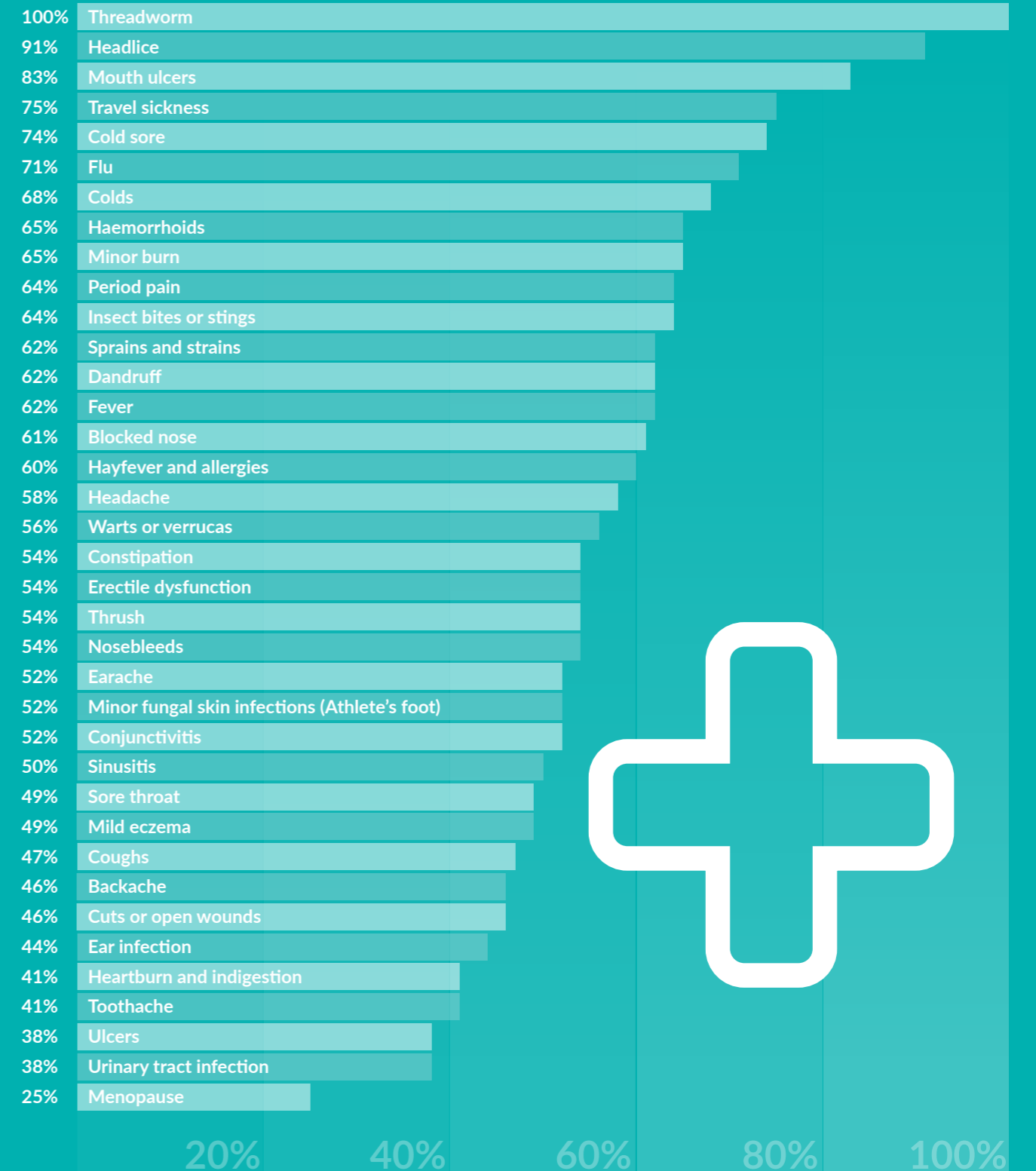
Mark Burdon observes:



“Consumers may not realise that GPs are now advised against prescribing antibiotics for self-limiting infections such as colds, sore throat and earache.¹³ It’s important that we improve awareness and signpost the resources that will give more consumers the confidence to recognise when self-care is appropriate and when more specialist care might be needed.”



PAGB’s research reveals the conditions which are most likely to end with advice to buy an OTC medicine or therapy when a consumer has seen a GP or attended A&E are:¹⁴



SECTION 4: Education – key to self-care confidence

PAGB's research confirms that education is the key to increasing self-care with four in five (83%) of those surveyed saying we need more education to encourage consumers to take a more proactive approach.



83% of people surveyed say we need more education to encourage a proactive approach in self-care



Three-quarters (**73%**) see education around self-care as a job for the NHS



Just over half (**57%**) think the Government should be involved, and

52% see parents as key providers of self-care education.¹⁵



Michelle Riddalls says, "Education and awareness will be the key to increased use of self-care and we know that improving health literacy – which is simply having the combination of reading and listening skills and understanding of data that is needed to make informed health decisions – will also have a much wider impact on an individual's health and wellbeing."¹⁶

The importance of education has also been highlighted in *Fit for the Future: GP Pressures 2023*, a report on the crisis in primary care published by the Royal College of General Practitioners.¹⁷

The RCGP report points out that in 2022, surgeries provided almost five times more appointments for flu-like illness than they had five years earlier, and there was a 79% spike in appointments for Group A Strep related infection. And the authors warn, "Without urgent action, next winter could be even worse." This highlights the increasing demand on primary care services and underlines the importance of minimising avoidable appointments to ensure swift treatment for Strep and other infections which require GP care.

The report, which drew on health surveillance data and a survey of 2,649 general practice staff, included a five-point action plan to address the deepening crisis in primary. Dr Binita Kalaria says, "As you might expect, the most urgent priority was the need for more clinical staff but the next was a patient education programme to encourage self-care."¹⁷

The RCGP report explained, "Launching a public education campaign could free up consultation time for those who really need expert advice, by providing guidance for patients on how they can consider alternatives before booking an appointment with their general practice."

Outlining the shape such a campaign might take, the report's authors suggest, "To have the impact required, this would need to be funded by the Government but co-designed by patients and professionals working in general practice and other healthcare settings."

And the good news is that much of this work has already been done. Deborah Evans explains, "In 2021, after working with health professionals, Royal Colleges, NHS Clinical Commissioners and other key stakeholders, PAGB published *Realising the potential: Developing a blueprint for a self-care strategy for England* – which explored the challenges around greater use of self-care, and presented a series of simple, step-by-step solutions."¹⁸

PAGB continues to lead the way on self-care, establishing self-care as the starting point for all personal health management.

Empowering people through pharmacy as a first port of call on all self-care needs with the confidence and information to look after themselves when they can, and visit the GP when they need to, gives people greater control of their own health and encourages healthy behaviours that help prevent ill health in the long-term.



Only **61%** of those on the lowest income (less than £15,000) say they would be comfortable making health decisions for themselves

The data shows a link between earnings and opting to self-care, with only 61% of those on the lowest income (less than £15,000) saying they were comfortable making health decisions for themselves and their family, compared to 79% of those with a joint household income of £80,000 or more. In addition, PAGB's research suggests the tough economic environment is also influencing decisions around self-care.



Two in five (**41%**) of those on the lowest incomes said the cost-of-living crisis had impacted their ability to purchase OTC medicines, compared to just...



29% of those on the highest income.

Three in five of those on the lowest income do not have to pay for their prescriptions, so there is a strong financial incentive for them to go to a GP for basic medicines.¹⁹

SECTION 5: How to be more resourceful

Access to reliable health information and advice provides an essential backstop for consumers when it comes to decisions around self-care, and it's estimated that 5% of all internet searches are health related.²⁰ This was underlined by PAGB's research, which found that three in five people (61%) had used the internet to research their symptoms, with men more likely to use this approach than women; 61% compared to 53%.

There is a stark generation gap, with 18- to 24-year-olds the most likely to use the web as a source of health information; 81% compared to fewer than a third (32%) of those aged 75 or more.²¹

However, this is a double-edged sword because there is so much health information available online as well as health misinformation. As the charity FullFact points out, "The problem comes from trusted and accurate information being shared on social media platforms alongside false, misleading or harmful content – often indistinguishable from correct and up to date content."²²

This is confirmed by PAGB's latest data, which found that almost half (47%) of those surveyed admitted they are sometimes overwhelmed by the amount of information available, a quarter (24%) were not convinced they could find accurate and trustworthy information online and a third (34%) were not sure which websites to believe.

PAGB's survey found that a third of consumers who had used the internet to access health information had not gone to the NHS website – even though three-quarters (76%) of those who had said it was easy to find the information they were looking for, and a similar number (77%) said it helped them make an informed decision on how best to proceed

Key facts from PAGB's research



5% of all internet searches are health related.²⁰ which was underlined by PAGB research that found...



61% of people used the internet to research their symptoms.



61% of men would search online, compared to **53%** of women.



81% of 18- to 24-year-olds use the web as a source of health information; but this drops to only...



32% of those aged 75 years or more.²¹



47% admitted they are sometimes overwhelmed by the amount of information available, with...



24% not convinced they could find accurate and trustworthy information online and **34%** were not sure which websites to believe.



A third of consumers that had used the internet to access health information had not gone to the NHS website, although of those who had **76%** said the NHS website was easy to find information on, and **77%** said it helped them make an informed decision about how to proceed.

SECTION 6: First stop: Pharmacy focus

Community pharmacists are another often under-utilised as a source of health information. Despite being easy to access, PAGB's real-world data shows that only three in five consumers (60%) are using their local pharmacist as a first step in seeking advice or medicines for self-treatable conditions. Down from 69% in 2022.

Only 60% of people used their pharmacist as a first step in seeking advice or medicine for self-treatable conditions.

Of those who didn't, a third (35%) went online and 17% preferred to go straight to their GP in case they had a serious problem.

Yet pharmacists are highly trained experts who are able to provide a growing number of medicines which were once prescription only (POM) but have been switched to pharmacy medicines (P). Some, known as pharmacist prescribers, have also undergone additional training which allows them to dispense a range of prescription medicines.



71% said they thought more medicine should be available without prescription

Not surprisingly, 71% of those surveyed thought that more medicines should be available to buy from a pharmacist without the need for a prescription. In particular, there was call for widening access to antibiotics and pain relief.



Reclassifying **5%** of prescription-only medicines could save **£611 million**

Analysis by Frontier Economics shows that reclassifying just 5% of the prescription-only medicines currently dispensed by the NHS would deliver savings of £611 million on prescriptions and associated costs.



5% reduction in GP prescribed medicine could also save **£772 million**

Based on the average number of prescription items per GP appointment, reducing prescribing by 5% would also save the NHS an additional £772 million in avoided GP appointments. This would also make it easier for patients who needed to see a GP to get an appointment.



Michelle Riddalls says,

"Switches, which make more medicines available without the need for a prescription, are a simple and effective way to improve the self-care options for consumers. Some of these reclassified medicines – such as the painkiller ibuprofen, indigestion medicine Nexium and thrush treatment Canesten – are now so widely used that many people don't realise they were once prescription only.

"This is why it's always a good idea to speak to a pharmacist. They will be able to suggest remedies you may not know about. For instance, this year many hay fever sufferers found it difficult to manage their symptoms as a result of the unusually high pollen counts. Those who asked a pharmacist will have discovered that Allevia and Treathay (fexofenadine hydrochloride) are now available as OTC medicines."

Last word

Michelle Riddalls says, “We are facing unprecedented challenges in primary care, with fewer and fewer GPs struggling to treat more and more patients. This will continue to get worse as more doctors reach retirement, or burn out, and demand continues to rise as a result of our ageing population.”

As we approach another winter, the British Medical Association is warning “GP practices across the country are experiencing significant and growing strain with declining GP numbers, rising demand, struggles to recruit and retain staff and knock-on effects for patients.”²³



Analysis shows the NHS could save,
£1.7billion
a year with greater use of self-care
and over-the-counter medicines.

Analysis by Frontier Economics

Dr Binita Kalaria says, “Increasing self-care and empowering patients to manage minor injuries and ailments themselves is essential if we are to protect the health service, and ensure that resources are focused on those with the greatest need, and not those with the most persistent voices.”

And there are potentially huge dividends for the NHS. Analysis by Frontier Economics suggests that greater use of self-care and over-the-counter medicines (OTCs) would save the NHS £1.7billion a year.²⁴

Mark Burdon says, “Raising awareness of the benefits of self-care and encouraging the wider use of OTC medicines and the expert advice that is available from community pharmacies will deliver enormous savings to the NHS, freeing up GP appointments, cutting A&E waiting times and improving health outcomes.”



“We are facing unprecedented challenges in primary care” Michelle Riddalls

“There are hidden dividends, too. Using PAGB’s latest data, analysts from Frontier Economics estimate that annually 33 million people in the UK have at least one self-treatable illness which they ignore and they point out, ‘When these people use OTCs to effectively treat their illnesses, their health improves and they experience a better quality of life.’”

Frontier Economics estimate that OTCs already deliver £14.9 billion annually in wellbeing savings – a five-fold return on investment in terms of consumer spending on these medicines. This is calculated on the basis of the quality-adjusted life years – or QALYs – that OTCs generate.

QALYs are used by governments, regulators and health economists to assess the value for money of different health interventions. They take into account both the quality and quantity of life a medicine or health intervention delivers. Quality of life is scored on five measures: mobility, ability to self-care, ability to carry out usual activities, pain and anxiety or depression.²⁵

A QALY is the equivalent of a year of perfect health, which the UK Government calculates is worth £70,000 and the Global Self-Care Federation estimates that every episode of self-care provides a QALY of 0.0034 per person.



Michelle Riddalls
in summary notes,

“This may seem like a small gain, but when you multiply this by the UK’s 61 million OTC users it is easy to see how increased use of self-care will deliver huge savings, and ensure that NHS resources are focused where they are most needed.”

“More importantly, self-care and the safety net of community pharmacy provide swift, accessible and simple symptom relief. As we approach another winter spike in coughs, colds and flu, coupled with new Covid variants, opting to self-care is the best way to support and protect the NHS.”



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