

Prescribing of medicines available for purchase over the counter (OTC) and self care – Frequently Asked Questions

1. What are self-limiting conditions/minor ailments?

Self-limiting conditions are illnesses or conditions which will either resolve themselves without medical intervention or which have no long-term harmful effect on a person's health. Minor ailments are uncomplicated conditions which can be diagnosed and managed without medical intervention.

2. Why have you stopped funding medicines available to treat these conditions?

Patients can purchase such medicines after seeking appropriate advice from a community pharmacist or other healthcare professional. Mid Essex CCG is keen to support patients in managing their own self-limiting conditions and minor ailments, which do not need to be treated by a doctor. Not taking up an appointment for the supply of an over-the-counter medicine will increase availability of appointments for patients with more serious conditions.

OTC medicines are sometimes far more expensive for the NHS to supply than for people to buy themselves. Money saved from doing this can then go towards treating more serious conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

OTC medicines are not as expensive as you may think. Painkillers such as paracetamol are widely available in pharmacies and supermarkets and may cost as little as 1p per tablet compared to 3p per tablet on the NHS. The antihistamine loratadine 10mg can be purchased for as little as £1.50 for 30 tablets. This is why, when you only need them now and again, it is better to buy over the counter instead.

Some OTC medicines do not work very well. Though some, such as cough syrups may ease symptoms, there is a lack of evidence to support prescribing them. Simple home remedies such as 'honey and lemon' would work just as well, rather than paying for more expensive cough syrups.

If the medicines you are requesting are not on the preapproved list of medicines across mid Essex for prescribing (called the Formulary), your GP should not prescribe them and you should purchase them over the counter.

3. Are there no other ways in which the NHS could save money?

Stopping the inappropriate prescribing of OTC medicines is now part of national plans from NHS England. In general these OTC medications are low-cost items easily available for purchase – and stopping prescribing saves not just the cost of the medicines themselves but also NHS costs through the entire process:

- professional costs and time of GP/nurse to generate the prescription
- professional costs and time to dispense the medicines
- transportation costs for completed prescriptions to be sent to NHS Business Service Authority (NHSBSA)

- professional cost and time for NHSBA to record and process prescriptions, pay pharmacists and report back to the CCG
- professional cost and time for CCG staff to analyse prescribing data generated from prescriptions

For example, over the 12 months between May 2016 and April 2017 the cost to the mid Essex health economy for paracetamol on prescription exceeded £380,000.

We are having to make some very difficult decisions to ensure we continue using public money in the most effective way to fund services based on the greatest need for our wider community. We therefore have to prioritise prescribing and services based on clinical need and evidence-based outcomes for patients whilst managing the continuing cost pressures.

4. If you are no longer prescribing these medicines, where can I get them?

Medicines can be purchased at low cost from community pharmacies and/or supermarkets, and most people already do this when they need them. The extended opening times of many shops give you rapid access to treatment, rather than delaying treatment by attending a GP appointment for a prescription.

The range of medicines available over the counter increases regularly and a community pharmacist is best placed to give advice on the most appropriate product to use. Shops and supermarkets will have a more limited range of these products that you can purchase.

If your problem is more serious and needs the attention of a GP or other health professional, your pharmacist is trained to recognise this and advise you to see your GP where appropriate.

You may find it helpful to keep a small supply of medicines at home for use such as painkillers for headaches and anti-allergy cream for bites or stings. Buying 'own brand' or generic items may be more cost effective than branded products.

5. I need this medicine for my child, can I have it on prescription?

It is expected that all patients, regardless of age, should be able to access or purchase such medicines for minor conditions. In the case of children the parent/guardian/carer has the responsibility for providing it.

6. I am being treated with these medicines for a long-term medical condition and taking them regularly. Do I need to purchase them?

Where an OTC medicine is being used as part of a complex combination of medicines to manage a long-term condition, and the GP is helping you to monitor the combination, then it may be prescribed at the GP's discretion. For example:

- Paracetamol for short-term pain relief and headaches should be purchased, but paracetamol used in long-term management of chronic pain (regularly needing 2 tablets four times a day) may be prescribed

- Creams/emollients for minor dry skin conditions should be purchased, but can be prescribed where there is a clinical skin diagnosis.

Where you are willing and able to purchase these yourselves you will be helping the NHS in doing so.

Hayfever/allergic rhinitis is not a long-term medical condition and treatment is only required for a few months each year so it can be managed without medical input.

7. I have a medical exemption certificate. Can I have the medicine on prescription?

We are asking all patients across mid Essex to purchase medicines for their own self-limiting conditions and minor ailments. This includes patients with medical exemption for a medical condition, maternity or age.

Self-limiting conditions are illnesses or conditions which will either resolve on their own or which have no long-term harmful effect on a person's health. Minor ailments are uncomplicated conditions which can be diagnosed and managed without medical intervention. These conditions are usually unrelated to the condition for which you have medical exemption and so should be purchased rather than prescribed.

8. I have been to my pharmacy to buy a medicine but they will not sell it to me. What do I do?

There will be some situations where a pharmacist feels it would not be appropriate to sell you a medicine, based on the information you provide and on their professional judgement. If this is the case the pharmacist should explain why, and advise on what you should do.

9. Who can I contact if I have further queries regarding this policy?

Please contact the Mid Essex CCG Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) by calling 01245 459459 (office hours 9am-5pm, with confidential voicemail available out of hours) or by emailing meccg.patientexperience@nhs.net.

More information about PALS and a postal address are available from the CCG website at <http://midessexccg.nhs.uk/get-involved/patient-advice-and-liaison-service-pals>.