

# Self Care Nation

Self care attitudes and  
behaviours in the UK



Forewords by  
Dr Pete Smith OBE, Co-Chair, Self Care Forum  
and John Smith, Chief Executive, PAGB

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“Self care is defined as the actions people take for themselves and their families to promote and maintain good health and wellbeing and to take care of their self-treatable conditions.”



There are  
an estimated  
**57 million**  
GP consultations and  
**3.7 million**  
visits to A&E for self-treatable  
conditions a year,  
costing the NHS  
**£2.3 billion**<sup>2,3</sup>

## Dr Pete Smith OBE, Co-Chair, Self Care Forum

**P**AGB's *Self Care Nation*<sup>1</sup> research reveals the significant on-going challenges facing the NHS and explores current attitudes towards self care and the impact people's behaviour has on our stretched GP and A&E services.

Taking an in-depth look at how people interact with primary care, this research supports a wider body of evidence that indicates a large number of GP and A&E visits are for self-treatable conditions. This suggests a disconnect between people's good intentions to self care and their actions when they feel ill.

The NHS Five Year Forward View<sup>4</sup> highlights the increasing demands on our healthcare system: the result of a growing and ageing population; more of us living longer but with multiple and complex chronic conditions; and the impact of lifestyle factors such as diet and physical inactivity on people's health and wellbeing.

This is compounded by a 'crisis' in general practice, as defined by The King's Fund<sup>5</sup>, with increasing numbers of consultations and difficulty finding doctors to fulfil the demands and expectations of patients, as well as a drive to shift more care from hospitals to primary care without appropriate resources. As a result people are finding it increasingly difficult to get GP appointments and waiting times are increasing.

I believe it is important that we equip people with the knowledge to look after their own health and wellbeing, not only to ease growing pressures on the NHS but also to ensure people can swiftly access the most appropriate advice and treatment when they are unwell.

The work we do at the Self Care Forum aims to further the reach of self care and embed it in everyday life. For self care to become people's default position, we believe there needs to be:

- engagement and commitment from health professionals to empower people in their own health, to give them confidence to make positive health decisions
- reliable, consistent and clear information and resources to support people to make confident decisions about their health
- education to improve people's health literacy, enabling them to understand health information and therefore act upon it.

This report reveals the depth of change needed if we are to realise these ambitions, but it also serves to underline why this is a challenge we have an urgent responsibility to address.



**Dr Pete Smith OBE**  
GP and Self Care Forum  
Co-Chair

Dr Pete Smith has 27 years' experience as a GP, working at a practice which won the NICE Shared Learning Award for reduction of antibiotics through encouragement of self care.

In addition to his role as Co-Chair for the Self Care Forum, Dr Smith is Vice President of the National Association of Primary Care and has chaired two WIPP national pilots for promoting self care. He is also a member of NHS England's Self Care Programme Board.



## Foreword

# John Smith, Chief Executive, PAGB (Proprietary Association of Great Britain)

**I**N 2002, Sir Derek Wanless, in his seminal report *Securing our Future Health*<sup>6</sup>, highlighted the need for everyone to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. Recognising when it is appropriate to self care for self-treatable conditions at home, or with advice from a pharmacist, and only visiting a GP or A&E department when medical intervention is necessary can significantly reduce demand on the NHS, releasing appointments for those who most need them and saving an estimated £2.3 billion a year<sup>2,3</sup>.

We conducted the Self Care Nation research<sup>1</sup> to examine people's attitudes to self care and how these attitudes influence their behaviour. We found that people of all ages, genders and from different parts of the UK are acutely aware of the impact of their use of NHS services, but more than a third still told us they had visited their GP for a minor condition they could have treated themselves, or with advice from a pharmacist<sup>1</sup>.

A wide range of over-the-counter medicines available from supermarkets, other retail stores and pharmacies, can provide relief from the symptoms of many self-treatable conditions, such as coughs, colds, headaches and stomach upsets.

Where people don't feel confident in choosing an appropriate medicine for themselves – if they haven't experienced a set of symptoms before or are concerned about possible interactions with other medicines they are taking, for example – they can seek advice from a pharmacist. Pharmacists are highly trained healthcare professionals who provide advice about self care and self-treatable conditions, and can identify when symptoms need to be assessed by a doctor. There are 11,674 community pharmacies in England<sup>7</sup>, many of which have extended evening and weekend opening hours. However, our data revealed that – despite visiting pharmacies regularly to pick up prescriptions – few people are asking for advice or using the wider health services pharmacies can offer<sup>1</sup>.

The results of our research provide a useful insight into the choices people make about where to access healthcare advice and the disconnect between what they say and what they do. More needs to be done at the national, regional and local level to overcome the barriers to self care that this research highlights.



**John Smith**  
Chief Executive, PAGB

Empowering people to self care offers far reaching benefits to individuals, healthcare professionals, the NHS, and society as a whole.



## Executive summary

## Executive summary

**ENCOURAGING people to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing should be the foundation of our healthcare system. NHS services are under pressure from rising demand and a challenging financial settlement.**

However, there are still large numbers of GP and A&E visits for symptoms that could be treated at home or with the advice of a pharmacist, and there remains a continued under-use of pharmacies for services beyond the dispensing of prescription medicines. PAGB commissioned a survey of 5,011 UK adults aged between 18 and 75, to examine their attitudes to self care and explore how this influences their behaviour and interactions with healthcare services.

**We found that:**

- The majority of people (92 per cent) feel it is important to take responsibility for their own health to ease the burden on the NHS.
- But there is a disconnect between attitude and behaviour: more than one third of people visit their GP for conditions they could treat at home.
- Almost half the population wouldn't visit their local pharmacist in the first instance for advice about a self-treatable condition.
- Some people feel entitled to see their GP, though admit they would reconsider the frequency of their visits if there was a direct financial consequence.

**The results indicate that there are a number of measures that could empower people and help overcome the barriers to self care:**

- **Raise awareness of each individual's NHS footprint**  
The research suggests that when people understand the impact of using GP and A&E services when the same advice and/or treatment is available from a pharmacy, many would change their behaviour to save the NHS.
- **Increase awareness of the expertise of pharmacists**  
The main barrier preventing people from visiting the pharmacy as the first port of call seems to be a lack of awareness of the skills and expertise of the pharmacist. Of the 47 per cent of people who said they wouldn't seek advice from their pharmacist first on self-treatable conditions, nearly one in five felt pharmacists weren't as qualified as doctors and nurses<sup>1</sup>. More needs to be done to educate people about pharmacy and raise awareness of the expertise of pharmacists.
- **Ensure consistent messaging and signposting to appropriate services**  
Awareness of the health and wellbeing services offered in pharmacies, and confidence in using these services, is low. Consistent information from NHS 111, NHS Choices and all healthcare professionals is needed.
- **Improve health literacy and promote self care**  
Our research indicates that despite good intentions, many people do not know how to self care, and are unsure which conditions can be treated without a visit to the doctor. Health information is currently too complex for more than 60 per cent of working age adults in England to understand<sup>8</sup>, therefore encouraging more individuals to take responsibility for their own health and practise self care will require significant improvements in health literacy.

## Research methodology

## Objective

To gain an insight into people's attitudes to self care and how this influences their behaviour.

## Methodology

An online survey was conducted by Pureprofile, on behalf of PAGB.

A cross section of

**5,011**

UK adults

aged  
between

**18-75**

were questioned.

Data was split by



Age

Gender

Region

City

Profession

The research  
was conducted in  
**September**

**2016**

**43** questions  
were asked via  
an online survey



Self care today



## How do people feel about self care?

**T**HE research suggests people’s attitudes towards self care are largely very positive<sup>1</sup>. The majority are willing to self care, and most have a level of confidence about doing so and understand how it could benefit both themselves and the NHS.

Of the 87 per cent who said they had suffered from a self-treatable condition over the past twelve months, most felt confident practising self care to ease their symptoms. The research suggests that people understand which conditions they can self-treat, with headaches, colds, backache, coughs and sore throats cited as the most common self-treatable conditions people experienced in the past 12 months<sup>1</sup>.

When asked about the use of services, 81 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that A&E and GP services should only be used when it’s absolutely essential and over two thirds (70 per cent) of the people we surveyed felt these services should not be used for self-treatable conditions<sup>1</sup>.

77 per cent of people surveyed think the NHS is currently going through the biggest financial squeeze in its history, and 86 per cent believe the increasing demand for care is putting NHS services under a huge amount of pressure. Nearly a quarter (22 per cent) of respondents think the NHS simply won’t exist 10 years from now<sup>1</sup>.

However, despite the current strain, two in five (40 per cent) believe the NHS is currently performing well and two thirds (66 per cent) think it is providing a good service to those who need it<sup>1</sup>.

Many of the respondents recognised that self care can ease the pressure on healthcare services and save the NHS money. Three in five people were aware that self care was easier and more convenient for the individual and nearly half said self care meant they didn’t need to take time off work for a GP appointment. Over half thought buying an OTC medicine would be cheaper than paying £8.40 for a prescription and 69 per cent thought it was quicker than waiting for a GP appointment<sup>1</sup>.

**92%**

The majority<sup>1</sup> (92 per cent) agreed that it is important for people to take more responsibility for their own health to ease the burden on the NHS<sup>1</sup> and many say they are confident in dealing with self-treatable conditions.

What do you think the benefits of self care are? Please select all that apply

It’s quicker than seeing a GP	69%
It’s easier and more convenient for the individual	60%
I don’t have to take time off work for an appointment	46%
It’s cheaper than paying for a prescription	54%



## What action are people taking?

34%

Although the majority agreed GP and A&E services should only be used when essential, over the past 12 months over one third (34 per cent) visited a GP about self-treatable conditions<sup>1</sup>.



**D**ESPITE the research showing that people are largely supportive of self care and have good intentions, it has uncovered a disconnect between people's thoughts and behaviour, with many still defaulting to their GP rather than a pharmacist for advice on self-treatable conditions.

Over the past 12 months, more than one third of adults surveyed visited the GP and 12 per cent went directly to A&E for self-treatable conditions like coughs and hayfever<sup>1</sup>.

NHS 111 is the NHS non-emergency number for people to call if they need medical help or advice but it's not a life-threatening situation. Among those we surveyed, prompted awareness of NHS 111 was high at 85 per cent, however, usage of the service was low, at only 36 per cent. 12 per cent of respondents said they would never use the service, with those aged 65-75 years old more inclined to visit their GP or nurse practitioner for advice. However, half of those who haven't used the NHS 111 service before said they would use it in the future<sup>1</sup>.

Have you ever used the NHS 111 helpline to get health advice on a self-treatable condition in the first instance?

No, I haven't used it but would do in the future	50%
No, I would never use it	12%

The most common self-treatable conditions in the past 12 months<sup>1</sup>



Headaches



Coughs



Colds



Sore throats



Backache



## What are the barriers to self care?

# People rarely think of the pharmacist as their first port of call

**T**HE research suggests several factors which may be contributing to the disconnect between people’s expressed willingness to self care and their actions. The heart of the problem appears to be a lack of awareness of the support that the pharmacist can offer, coupled with a belief that pharmacists are not as qualified to cope with these conditions as GPs or A&E staff.

**Awareness of the health and wellbeing services pharmacies can offer is low.** More than a quarter (29 per cent) of the people surveyed visit a pharmacy at least once a month, mainly to collect a repeat prescription. However, despite being easily accessible, use of the wider services available in pharmacies is low, for example flu vaccinations (used by 3 per cent of respondents), travel health advice or vaccinations (used by 3 per cent of respondents) and health checks (used by 2 per cent of respondents). Community pharmacies are ideally placed to deal with these services, but at present, many are visiting the GP or practice nurse. This may change over time, as more people become aware that flu and travel health vaccinations are now available in some community pharmacies<sup>1</sup>.

Are you aware of the healthy living services community pharmacies can provide? (e.g. advice on sexual health, travel vaccinations and general wellbeing)	
Yes, I am aware of the services and use them regularly	9%
Yes, I’m aware but I don’t use these services	50%

The research found that almost half of the people surveyed (47 per cent) wouldn’t visit their local pharmacist in the first instance for advice or medication for a self-treatable condition. Of the 47 per cent, confidence was one of the key barriers as nearly one in five (18 per cent) felt pharmacists weren’t as qualified as doctors and nurses<sup>1</sup>.

If you do not use your pharmacist as your first step in seeking advice or medication for self-treatable conditions, why not? Please select all that apply	
Pharmacists aren’t as qualified as GPs or hospital staff	18%
I have been seeing my GP for many years and do not wish to change	11%
I am entitled to free prescriptions so would never pay for OTC medicine	11%
I am entitled to see my GP when I want	12%
My GP surgery is closer	8%



Almost half the population wouldn’t visit their local pharmacist in the first instance for advice about a self-treatable condition<sup>1</sup>.





## What are the barriers to self care?

### People feel entitled to use the GP

28%

More than a quarter (28 per cent) agreed that the NHS should be a free healthcare service for everyone to use whenever they feel like it, even if their condition isn't serious<sup>1</sup>.

£

**T**HE research suggests a number of factors including habit, perceived entitlement, and the reassurance of advice offered by GPs are potentially fuelling frequent visits to the doctor, with people agreeing that if theoretically they had to pay £50 to see a GP, they would be more likely to visit the pharmacist first.

Of the 47 per cent who said they wouldn't visit their pharmacist in the first instance for a self-treatable condition, 12 per cent of respondents felt it was their right to visit their GP whenever they wanted and a further one in 10 were entitled to free prescriptions so would visit the GP for a prescription rather than pay for an OTC medicine. In addition, over a quarter (28 per cent) agreed that the NHS should be a free healthcare service for everyone to use whenever they feel like it, even if their condition isn't serious<sup>1</sup>.

Responses from older adults (mainly those aged 65-75 year olds) indicated that turning to a GP as a first port of call had become a habit. One in 10 (11 per cent) said they always went to their GP and didn't want to stop doing so<sup>1</sup>.

In a theoretical world in which people had to pay for GP services directly, many people would think twice about visiting their general practitioner. Nearly half (46 per cent) of respondents would only visit their GP if it was essential and a third (33 per cent) would be more inclined to visit a pharmacist in the first instance<sup>1</sup>.

In this thought experiment, a quarter (23 per cent) would phone NHS 111 for advice and 14 per cent would go to a supermarket to buy a medicine to treat their symptoms. While PAGB does not advocate the introduction of charging for GP appointments, these results indicate a potential willingness to change behaviour if people feel there is a strong enough incentive to do so<sup>1</sup>.

If you had to pay £50 for a GP appointment, what would you do?  
Please select all that apply

I would only visit my GP if I thought it was essential	46%
I would be more inclined to visit a pharmacist in the first instance	33%
I'd phone the NHS 111 helpline for advice	23%
I'd go to a supermarket and buy medicine	14%

When questioned on why people thought A&E services were being used for self-treatable conditions, the research revealed that a lack of understanding about the appropriate services to use and when was a key factor for 38 per cent of the people we surveyed. Over half (52 per cent) felt it was because people thought they were entitled to use the service for non-emergency needs because they pay for it through taxation and nearly two thirds (61 per cent) thought it was because it is quicker than getting an appointment with a GP<sup>1</sup>.

## What are the barriers to self care?

### Internet self-diagnosis

**T**HE evolution of the internet and social platforms has driven more people to check their symptoms online. This can help give people the confidence to self care, but can also confuse people or make them think their condition is more serious than it is.

Over a quarter (29 per cent) of respondents said they self-diagnosed on the internet, and of those, nearly a third (32 per cent) subsequently visited their GP or A&E to confirm their diagnosis<sup>1</sup>.

This may be because they were unsure of the reliability of the information they found online. This tendency for self-diagnosis highlights the need for better online signposting. Resources such as NHS Choices could play an important role in encouraging people to visit a pharmacist to check their diagnosis in the first instance.



## How can we empower people to self care?

### The future of self care

82%

Four in five<sup>1</sup> (82 per cent) of those surveyed were passionate about saving the NHS<sup>1</sup>.



**T**HE Self Care Nation research suggests there has been a positive shift in the nation's attitude towards self care, yet in practical terms, people still need education and support to make self care work for them.



#### Raise awareness of each individual's NHS footprint

The research suggested when people understand the impact of using GP and A&E services when the same advice and/or treatment is available from a pharmacy, many would change their behaviour to save the NHS.

In the second part of the research<sup>1</sup>, respondents were made aware that GP and A&E visits for self-treatable conditions are costing the NHS an estimated £2.3 billion a year<sup>2,3</sup> and are placing additional pressure on these overstretched services, which need to be available for more serious medical conditions. After reading this, four in five (80 per cent) would rethink the most appropriate service to use for a self-treatable condition<sup>1</sup>. When people were made aware of the personal cost of self care compared to the financial impact on the NHS, 29 per cent who qualified for free prescriptions said they would be willing to purchase an OTC medicine for a self-treatable condition instead of visiting the GP for a prescription, if it would save the NHS money<sup>1</sup>.



#### Increase awareness of the expertise of pharmacists

The research indicates that despite good intentions many people do not know how to self care and therefore visit the GP for advice or reassurance. Although 29 per cent visit a pharmacy at least once a month, for the majority this is to collect a repeat prescription and use of the wider services available in pharmacies is low<sup>1</sup>.

The main barrier preventing people from visiting the pharmacy first for advice or medication for self-treatable conditions seems to be a lack of awareness of the skills and expertise of the pharmacist<sup>1</sup>.

More needs to be done to educate people about pharmacy and raise awareness of the expertise of pharmacists. The Government, through NHS England and Public Health England, should partner with the pharmacy sector in a national public education campaign.

Community pharmacists have the clinical knowledge to know when an individual should seek advice of another healthcare professional for their symptoms. Pharmacists should be able to refer these people accordingly; fast-tracked if the pharmacist felt this was necessary. This would encourage people to visit the pharmacy first because they would leave with either a medicine or advice to make them feel better or an appointment to see another healthcare professional. Community pharmacy should also be enabled to 'write' in patient records so that any medication or advice given can be recorded to maintain continuity of care and ensure advice and treatment given in other healthcare settings (GP, hospital) can take general health, underlying conditions and medicines use into account.



## How can we empower people to self care?



### Ensure consistent messaging about self care & signposting to appropriate health services

Awareness of the health and wellbeing services offered in pharmacies, and confidence in using these services, is low. According to NHS England, 99 per cent of the population lives within 20 minutes' travel time of a community pharmacy, with 96 per cent walking or using public transport<sup>9</sup>. Our results suggest that inconsistent information about self care and where to access support for self-treatable conditions is creating confusion, which leads people to rely on GP and A&E services. Furthermore, NHS 111 only refers a small number of callers to pharmacy. Work underway to improve NHS 111 algorithms should be prioritised to reduce the number of people visiting the GP or A&E unnecessarily and provide more and better options for appropriate care.

It is essential that people receive consistent information that the pharmacy is the first port of call for self-treatable conditions.



### Improve health literacy and promote self care

71 per cent of people thought there should be better education around self-treatable conditions and relevant services to encourage more people to self care<sup>1</sup>. People also indicated they would welcome more support from local authorities and the government, as over a quarter (27 per cent) thought the council could provide better public information and 22 per cent said they should drive more awareness around national self care campaigns. On a wider level, two thirds (61 per cent) felt the government should provide more public information<sup>1</sup>.

Evidence indicates that health information is currently too complex for more than 60 per cent of working age adults in England to understand<sup>9</sup>. Encouraging more individuals to take responsibility for their own health will require significant improvements in health literacy.

Younger people are much more likely to turn to the internet to understand their symptoms, and then seek the advice of a GP to confirm their diagnosis. This suggests that although there is a need for improved health literacy across all age groups, the willingness of younger people to research their symptoms online, points to a clear opportunity to ensure this is supported by self care education to help them understand the information they find and act accordingly.

PAGB believes a focus must be placed on ensuring children receive the basic information and tools to self care effectively at school and at key points throughout their lives. Ensuring that education about self care and healthy lifestyles is a mandatory part of the national curriculum will help to drive a long-term change in behaviour. This message should then be reinforced at other key life stages, such as going to university and having a first child.

## Conclusion

This research has identified clear barriers which need to be overcome if we are to make a significant impact on self care behaviour and reduce the demands on the NHS. More needs to be done, through better education about the benefits of self care, consistent messaging about self care strategies and improvements to general health literacy, to ensure people are empowered to take more responsibility for their health and wellbeing. Such measures will provide individuals with the knowledge they need to safely and effectively manage their own and their family's health needs.

### What is health literacy?

It's our individual ability to understand and process health information. Providing accessible information that accurately signposts the public to appropriate services is essential in helping them make good health decisions.



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