



The Consumer
Healthcare Association


The Self-Care Census 2025:

Exploring consumer trends in self-treatable conditions and self-care practices

Executive summary

PAGB conducts this annual self-care survey to provide insights into the trends across the general population in self-treatable conditions, consumers' attitudes towards self-care and access to health services.

Self-care is the actions that people take for themselves and their families to promote and maintain good health and well-being, and to take care of their self-treatable conditions. We asked over 4,000 adults across the UK to share their experiences of self-care, looking to understand behavioural patterns across self-care practices and trends in common minor health conditions. This report puts these findings into context in the current state of healthcare services in the UK and aims to highlight the challenges and opportunities for self-care and the next steps that can be taken in policy and practice to promote self-care.

 **9 in 10** adults say they feel confident using an OTC medicine to manage their symptoms

The report reveals that attitudes towards self-care are very positive, with 84% of adults agreeing they would choose self-care as their first option for healthcare. Encouragingly confidence and trust in over-the-counter (OTC) medicines and their role in self-care also remains high, with 9 in 10 adults (91%) confirming they have used OTC products to treat their minor health conditions in the last year. In fact, 75% of GP appointments sought for self-treatable conditions have resulted in advice to take OTC medicines to self-care. The real-world evidence also highlights where OTC medicines, in particular established branded products, are bridging the gap. With 93% of adults who buy branded OTCs saying that the brand name helps them to choose the correct product, it highlights that established trusted brands

not only provide wide access to self-care medications but also empower people to self-care.

The consumer healthcare industry is also providing valuable support to people through digital tools and resources that support the self-care journey. With 6 in 10 people using online sources to look up their symptoms for self-treatable conditions, and as outlined in the Government's 10 Year Health Plan which details that the NHS App will signpost to well-evidenced consumer healthcare products, there is an opportunity for the NHS to utilise existing brand websites and information on medicines already available to consumers to offer reliable and trusted access to self-care.

 **6 in 10** people use online sources to look up their symptoms and self treatable conditions

 **75%** of GP appointments for self-treatable conditions have resulted in advice to use OTC medicines

Whilst attitudes towards self-care remain positive, the census has also uncovered a real decline in the current state of people's confidence to self-care, which appears to be impacting the decisions they take when seeking advice and treatment for their self-treatable conditions. This is

particularly evident in the dramatic drop in the percentage of people who feel confident to self-care for the common cold, which has declined from 81% in 2023 to 63% in 2025.

The data also highlights where there are noticeable health inequalities when it comes to accessing services and healthcare information amongst different demographic groups in the population. For example, there is a clear

 **Drop of 18** percentage points in confidence to self-care for the common cold between 2023 and 2025

difference in how confident adults with no formal education are in knowing how to find accurate and trustworthy health information online compared to adults who have gone onto higher and further education, who may have had more exposure and access to information on self-care.


Health literacy plays a huge role in informing people's confidence to practice self-care, which in turn can help reduce the number of unnecessary GP and A&E visits for self-treatable conditions. In light of the Government's commitment to shifting care from hospitals to the community and from treatment to prevention, it is concerning to see that 1 in 10 adults strongly agree they would choose A&E as their first choice for healthcare, which increases to 1 in 4 adults strongly or slightly agreeing amongst the cohort surveyed with no formal education. In order to alleviate pressures on already stretched NHS services, and to avoid exacerbating inequalities across healthcare education and access to information, more work needs to be done at a national level to ensure self-care is prioritised for all communities and neighbourhoods if the implementation of the 10 Year Health Plan is to be successful. This needs to be delivered through initiatives that drive awareness about self-care.

In addition, the census has uncovered that women's access to healthcare advice and treatment through the NHS is concerningly difficult to obtain. Women experiencing

common conditions such as the menopause and heavy menstrual bleeding are more likely to seek support from a GP for these issues where they may want a doctor's advice for their individual symptoms and yet are struggling to secure appointments.

Another insight that the data has uncovered is that there is a significant difference in attitudes towards self-care and healthcare services between younger and older generations. Young adults aged 18-24 are more likely to be referred to consult with a pharmacist when seeking advice from their GP or NHS 111 than older adults but are less likely to view them as a trusted source for healthcare information. We can see a similar parallel with younger adults being more likely than older generations to seek GP appointments for the top most experienced conditions, including coughs and blocked nose. This revealing gap in experience and confidence in understanding which pathways to take for advice and treatment for self-treatable conditions indicates there is more still to be done to ease the strain on the NHS. Ensuring availability and access to OTC medicines will be key to building a more supportive self-care environment, alongside improving education and awareness about self-care and utilisation of community pharmacists to empower future generations.

The results of the census outlined in this report support the case for prioritising self-care, highlighting the benefits it can provide by reducing demand on the NHS, reducing health inequalities and empowering people to take ownership of their own health. This real-world evidence will be important in supporting the 10 Year Health Plan's aim to embed self-care into the fabric of the NHS, with crucial insights that can ensure the ambitions around self-care are fully realised in practice.

 **1 in 10** adults strongly agree they would choose A&E as their first choice for healthcare



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SECTION 1: Crisis of confidence?

The real-world data from this year's survey shines a light on the shifting attitudes of the nation, revealing that confidence to self-care for self-treatable conditions is in a state of flux, despite a willingness from consumers to take control of their own health.

There is an obvious and growing appetite from the population to take responsibility for their health and well-being when it comes to common conditions, with 84% of adults agreeing that they would choose self-care as their first option for healthcare, up 6 percentage points from last year.

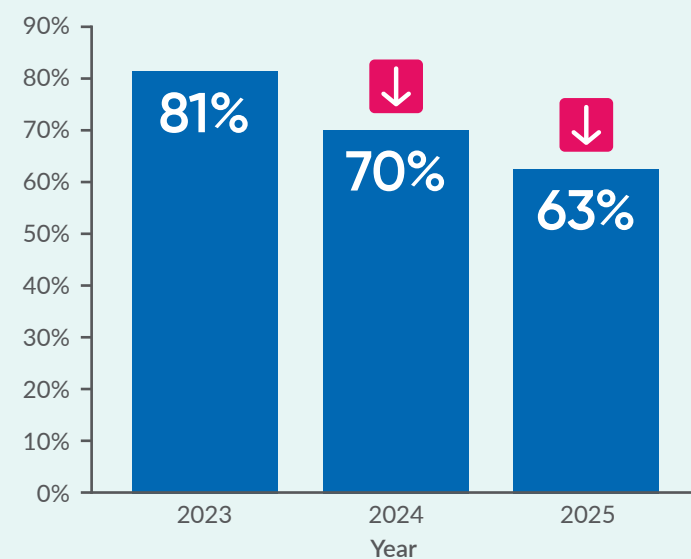
There also appears to be a general consensus amongst adults that the NHS is busy and under-resourced with



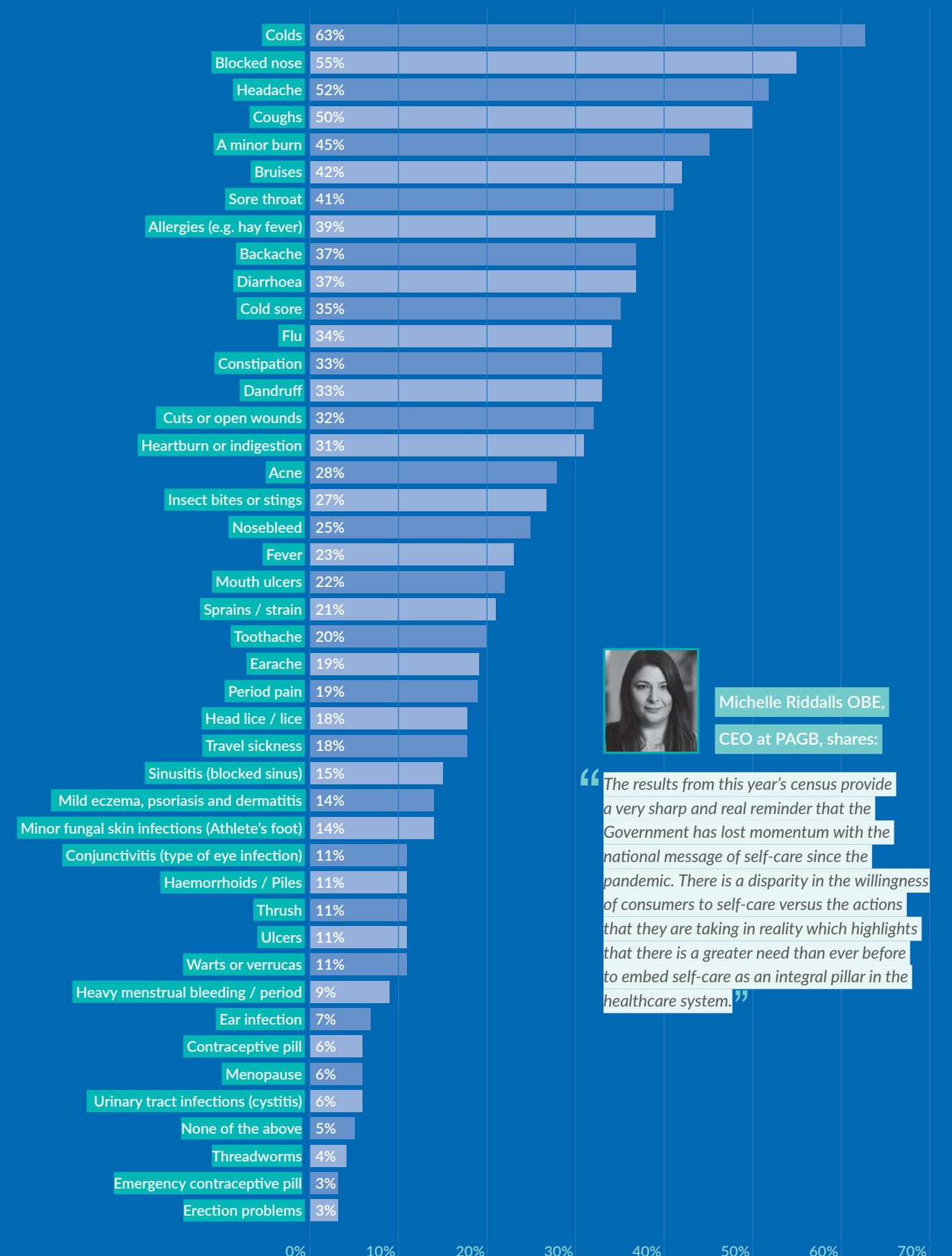
7 in 10 adults agreeing that this is a reason they would choose to treat themselves at home or seek advice from a pharmacy rather than visiting the GP or A&E.

However, whilst the desire to self-care appears to be strong, unfortunately we are also seeing that there is a marked decline across the last three years in consumers' confidence to self-care for nearly all the self-treatable conditions we surveyed. In fact, while it is the condition most people felt confident treating, consumer confidence to self-care for the common cold fell by 18 percentage points in just three years, from 81% in 2023 to just 63% in 2025. The conditions where there is the most drastic year-on-year change in consumer confidence to self-care include headlice (down 29 percentage points since 2023), as well as dandruff, insect bites/stings and travel sickness (all down 27 percentage points since 2023).

Confidence to self-care for the common cold



We asked people what self-treatable conditions they felt confident in dealing with themselves.



Michelle Riddalls OBE,
CEO at PAGB, shares:

“The results from this year's census provide a very sharp and real reminder that the Government has lost momentum with the national message of self-care since the pandemic. There is a disparity in the willingness of consumers to self-care versus the actions that they are taking in reality which highlights that there is a greater need than ever before to embed self-care as an integral pillar in the healthcare system.”



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The census data also highlights the relationship between health literacy and confidence to self-care.

The census data also highlights the relationship between health literacy and confidence to self-care. According to the World Health Organization, health literacy is mediated by organisational structures and availability of resources that enable people to access, understand, appraise and use information and services in ways that promote and maintain good health and well-being.¹

Of those individuals we surveyed with no formal education and who are less likely to have had access to these available support mechanisms throughout their education, only 27% would feel confident to treat a cough and only 30% feel confident treating a headache, compared to the average of 50% and 52% respectively across the population. This significant contrast could go some way to explaining the difference we can see in this year's census between people's positive attitude and intent to self-care versus their current state of confidence to do so.



only 27% of adults without a formal education would feel confident to treat a cough



only 30% would feel confident treating a headache

Michelle Riddalls OBE, adds:

“Overcoming these inequalities is incredibly important to ensure that no adult is disadvantaged or left-behind when it comes to their health. Increasing peoples' confidence to self-care can narrow the gap by equipping all socioeconomic groups with the tools they need to treat themselves effectively and appropriately where possible. The current challenge - and also the biggest opportunity - lies with amplifying the self-care message to increase education and awareness and support people's confidence to practice self-care for their self-treatable conditions.”

We need to see initiatives such as a national public awareness campaign, delivered at regular intervals, to improve peoples' understanding of self-care and the pathways they can take. This also needs to be underpinned by concrete policies which support the shifting focus of the NHS to move care from hospitals to communities, focus on preventing sickness not just treating it and making better use of technology.”



91% of adults surveyed had used an OTC medicine for a self-treatable condition at least once in the year

Brands bridging the gap

In line with our 2024 survey, we saw again that in three quarters of cases (75%) across all the self-treatable conditions that we surveyed where advice and treatment was sought from a GP, adults were directed to use OTC medications to self-care. In fact, 91% of the adults we surveyed had used an OTC medicine for a self-treatable condition at least once in the year, and just over 1 in 5 of the population (21%) had used an OTC medicine between 6-10 times.

This year, almost half of the adults surveyed (46%) described a self-treatable health condition as 'any minor conditions or symptoms that you can treat using over-the-counter medicines', indicating that people understand and equate taking OTC medicines with practising self-care. Almost 9 in 10 adults (87%) agree that they feel confident taking OTC medicines to manage their symptoms of a self-treatable condition. Despite a general decline in confidence to self-care across the conditions we surveyed, it is encouraging that confidence in using OTC medicines to treat self-treatable conditions remains high, highlighting the importance of OTC medicines as an accessible way to enable self-care in the community without GP intervention.



61% of respondents agreed that trust in a brand influenced their decision to purchase their OTC products

This confidence in using OTC medicines to self-care is complemented by consumers' trust in established and familiar OTC brands, which have built credibility and loyalty with their customers. 61% of respondents agreed that trust in a brand influenced their decision to purchase their OTC products with over 1 in 4 people saying that they strongly agreed with this. 77% of adults say they buy branded OTC products, and of those, 93% use the brand name to help them find and pick the right medicine when browsing shelves. This is even higher amongst younger adults; 83% of



93% of people who buy branded products use the brand name to help them find and pick the right medicine

18-24 year olds state that they buy branded OTC products with reasons given for why they chose to buy from a brand including trust, reliability, reputation and familiarity.



Mike Knowland, General Manager for Northern Europe at Bayer Consumer Health, and PAGB's President shares:

“Branding is incredibly important for consumers; they trust OTC brands that they know, which in turn empowers them to have the confidence to self-care. People want clear, accessible information to make informed decisions about their health, and established OTC brands invest a lot of resource in understanding consumers and communicating about the availability and benefits of their products, as well as increasing awareness about the conditions they help. In doing so, they build consumers' understanding and confidence about how to manage their self-treatable conditions though self-care by educating them about health areas they can treat or navigate for themselves and what products are available to use.”

Brands can also help to demystify some health conditions and medical language to explain self-care in ways that resonate with consumers across the channels and platforms they use every day, whether that's through marketing campaigns, information shared on websites, or engaging with consumers directly. One example is Canesten's The Truth Undressed campaign which helps break down intimate health barriers to provide education-at-scale for the next generation, equipping young people with the essential information they need to better understand their bodies as well as normalise conversations around healthcare for the female anatomy.”

Consumer healthcare brands are also supporting widening access to self-care through product innovation.

Consumer healthcare brands are also supporting widening access to self-care through product innovation. They research consumer needs and come up with products and services that are the preferred choice of the consumer. Brands can expand into new categories and release products to treat new conditions, encouraging more self-care by building on the trust and confidence that already exists with consumers.

This is evidenced in this year's survey with 41% of adults that buy branded OTC medicines agreeing that they would be more likely to purchase a new type of product from an existing OTC brand that they know over a standalone brand. Again, this appears to resonate most with younger adults with just over half (52%) of 18-24 year olds that purchased branded medication agreeing they would buy a new product from a brand they know. This increased engagement with brands that younger generations exhibit is encouraging and highlights where the OTC sector can ensure wide access to self-care medications and also empower people to self-care, especially given we have seen that the younger generation appear to currently be less confident in utilising pharmacy and look to NHS resources.

Switch it up

There is also a continued interest from consumers for more medicines to be switched – also known as reclassification, where the legal status of a medicine is changed to enable wider access without the need for a prescription – with appetite for more medicines to be made available over-the-counter. Almost 3 in 4 adults (74%) would like more medicines available from a pharmacy without a prescription. Consumers want to see widened access to antibiotics, pain relief and short-term sleep aids as well as OTC products for skin conditions such as acne and eczema.

 **74%** of adults would like more medicines available from a pharmacy without a prescription

Michelle Riddalls OBE, shares:

“Greater reclassification of medicines would support the Government's ambitions to move to community and pharmacy fronted healthcare which empowers patients to treat their self-treatable conditions at home.

Beyond the benefits to the individual, it is also estimated that if future reclassifications reduced NHS prescribing levels and spending by just 5%, it could save the NHS £1.4 billion per year in prescription and appointment costs.¹

Product innovations, including switching products from prescription only (POM) to pharmacy only (P) status, creating new technologies and introducing more convenient dosing, delivery and packaging systems, all contribute to the public health agenda by enabling more people to adopt self-care behaviour.”

In the past few years, work to identify new conditions and categories suitable for reclassification has been driven by the Reclassification Alliance.

In the past few years, work to identify new conditions and categories suitable for reclassification has been driven by the Reclassification Alliance – a reestablished collaboration coordinated by PAGB, the consumer healthcare association, with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).

PAGB chaired the Conditions and Categories working group, collaborating with key pharmacy and industry bodies, with input from chief pharmacists and the MHRA, to explore suitable categories where medicines could be reclassified to widen access treatments for certain conditions and indications. As a result of the initiative, in February 2025, the DHSC announced a list of medical conditions and categories where it is encouraging more reclassification applications to the MHRA.²

Michelle adds:

“The announcement from the Reclassification Alliance on the new conditions and categories suitable for switching is an important and significant step in the right direction to renew the UK's efforts and ambition to remain a world leader in reclassification and self-care. It is great to see that some of the conditions that people mentioned in the census where they wanted to see more OTC medications available are the ones of focus within this announcement.

To further unlock the full potential of OTCs, we must evaluate the status quo and identify new opportunities presented by advances in digital technologies and innovative ways of working within pharmacies. Widening access to medicines through reclassification forms a key pillar in the work that we are doing to build a sustainable healthcare service fit for the future and realise the full potential of self-care.

It is also in line with the Government's ambitions to move to community and pharmacy fronted healthcare which empowers patients to treat their self-treatable conditions at home. It will be hugely important to ensure that the 10 Year Health Plan includes the self-care policies needed to put this into practice.”



1. <https://www.pagb.co.uk/content/uploads/2023/07/20230712-Frontier-PAGB-OTC-Impact-Report-v1-0.pdf>

2. <https://healthmedia.blog.gov.uk/2025/02/05/new-opportunities-to-reclassify-medicines-what-you-need-to-know/>

SECTION 2: Common conditions

As part of this year's census, we surveyed adults to find out the most common self-treatable conditions they have experienced in the last 12 months, highlighting the current trends and prevalence of certain illnesses.

The data reveals that the topmost experienced self-treatable conditions have remained consistent compared to the last few years. The common cold continues to ail us, with just over half of those surveyed (51%) sharing they experienced this self-treatable condition at least once in the last 12 months. However, we are seeing a gradual decline in the last three years in the prevalence of this condition; in our 2022 survey 60% of adults had experienced a cold, dropping to 59% in 2023, and 52% in 2024. This correlates with a less significant cough and cold season across the last two winters.

Other top self-treatable conditions people have experienced over the previous year include headache, cough, blocked nose and backache, which remain common, impacting all adult age groups equally, from 18 to 65+.



The top 10 common self-treatable conditions
consumers experienced in the last 12 months:

1. Colds	51%
2. Headache	45%
3. Blocked nose	42%
4. Coughs	40%
5. Backache	36%
6. Allergies (e.g. hay fever)	33%
7. Sore throat	29%
8. Bruises	28%
9. A minor burn	27%
10. Diarrhoea	25%



69% of adults had experienced
3 or more self-treatable conditions
in the last year

The data has also revealed that women are more likely to report experiencing a self-treatable condition than men, which is an insight reflected across the top 10 most common conditions. Almost half of all women surveyed (49%) shared that they had experienced a headache at least once in the last 12 months, compared to just 39% of men. Similarly, 47% of women reported experiencing a blocked nose in the last year, whereas only 38% of men said the same. Indeed, there is little disparity in this trend across all the self-treatable conditions we surveyed, with the exception of conditions likely to result from physical injuries, such as cuts or open wounds and sprains and strain, where men do report experiencing these more than women.

The majority of the population report experiencing several self-treatable conditions a year. Almost 7 in 10 adults (69%) said they had experienced 3 or more self-treatable conditions in the last 12 months, and 10% of those surveyed had experienced 9 or more self-treatable conditions in the year.



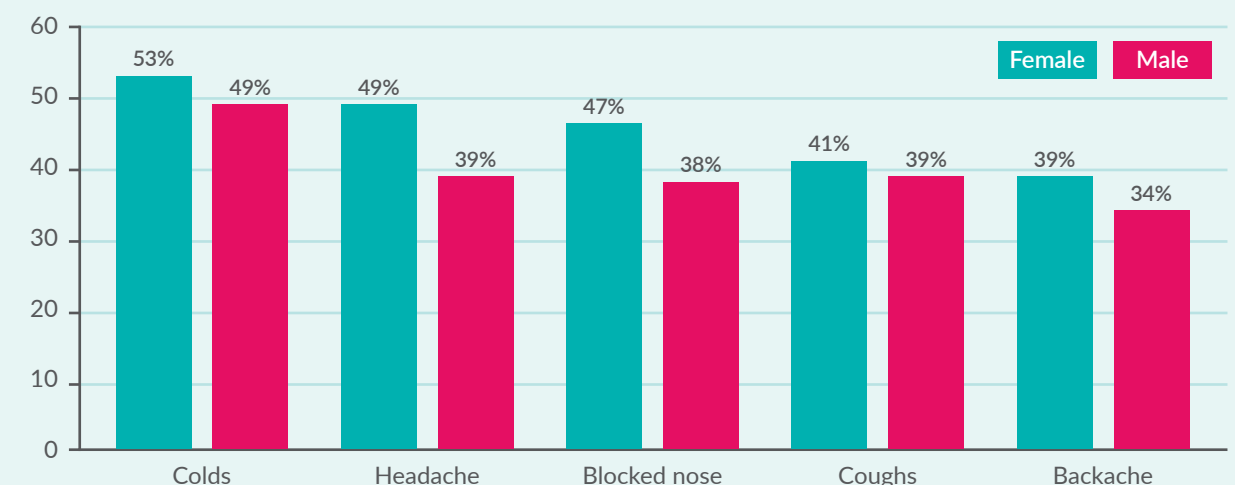
Dr Binita Kalaria,

GP and advisor to PAGB, shares:

“As the data shows some of the most common self-treatable conditions that the population experience are symptomatic of viral infections, such as colds, coughs and a blocked nose. Typically, we might experience these kinds of illnesses a couple of times a year depending on how contagious and virulent certain strains are, but it's not unusual to see people also presenting with other recurring self-treatable conditions several times in a year, such as acne, allergies, or period pain.

Ensuring people are confident to self-care for these recurring conditions will help to support them in taking control of their own health and well-being and reduce the likelihood of them returning to see their GP for the same conditions.”

Comparison of respondents by gender showing reporting of top self-treatable conditions



It is positive that the consumer healthcare industry has been able to innovate in these areas to improve access to effective treatments. For example, with the development of OTC products such as Evana Heavy Period Relief tablets, and recent reclassifications of medicines including Dymista Control nasal spray and Allevia allergy relief tablets. These advances are addressing previously unmet health needs and empowering more people to manage their health on their own terms.

SECTION 3: Healthcare choices

Self-care has a proven role when properly integrated into the healthcare system. It enables individuals to self-manage their conditions and minor ailments at home.

However, according to a report published by Frontier Economics in 2023, each year, at least 25 million GP appointments and 5 million A&E visits are used for self-treatable illnesses, costing the NHS an estimated £1.7 billion where OTC medicines could have been used instead.¹

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Consumers' healthcare choices in the last 12 months indicate a continued pattern of behaviour in choosing emergency or primary care services as their first port of call for treating minor health conditions. This year's census data supports the case that there is still a way to go to increase people's confidence to practice self-care for self-treatable conditions and reduce the pressures on NHS front-line services.

Strain on services

Total % of people who experienced the condition that sought advice from A&E:	
1. Sprains / strain	6%
2. Contraceptive pill	6%
3. Ear infection	5%
4. Allergies (e.g. hay fever)	4%
5. Acne	4%
6. Travel sickness	4%
7. Urinary tract infections (cystitis)	4%
8. Haemorrhoids	4%
9. Conjunctivitis	4%
10. Ulcers	4%

Looking at this year's responses compared to previous years, it is positive to see that the percentage of people experiencing self-treatable conditions that visit A&E for support appears to be declining. However, the data suggests there is still a worrying lack of awareness and confidence about how to self-care for some of these conditions. For example, colds, blocked nose and acne are some of the common self-treatable conditions that have seen the highest volumes of people visiting A&E for treatment and advice within the year.

10% of adults strongly agree they would go to A&E as their first option for treatment of self-treatable conditions

25% of adults without formal education agreed or strongly agreed they would go to A&E as their first choice for healthcare

Even more concerning is that there appears to be an increased leaning in attitudes towards using A&E for advice and treatment for minor health conditions, with 1 in 10 adults (10%) strongly agreeing that they would go to A&E as their first option when it comes to healthcare for self-treatable conditions, a climb of 2 percentage points since last year. The data also reveals a significant difference in attitudes across adults with different education levels – 1 in 4 adults (25%) with no formal education agreed or strongly agreed that they would choose A&E as their first choice for healthcare. This suggests that health literacy, specifically an individual's understanding and awareness about healthcare services and self-care options, plays an important role in informing peoples' decisions about the pathways they take to seek advice and treatment.

Total % of people who experienced the condition that sought advice from their GP:

1. Contraceptive pill	40%
2. Ear infection	38%
3. Urinary tract infections (UTI)	32%
4. Menopause	27%
5. Erectile dysfunction	26%
6. Conjunctivitis	18%
7. Thrush	18%
8. Heavy menstrual bleeding	17%
9. Mild eczema, psoriasis and dermatitis	16%
10. Emergency contraceptive pill	16%

Amongst the top self-treatable health concerns that saw the highest percentages of people experiencing them visiting a GP for advice and treatment, 6 out of 10 relate to women's health, including the contraceptive pill, urinary tract infections (UTIs), menopause, thrush and heavy menstrual bleeding. It is interesting to recognise that whilst traditionally some of these conditions have been treated by GPs, due to widened access of medicines via reclassification, and the introduction of Pharmacy First, there are now treatments available at pharmacy level for all of these conditions.

As the Government look to reform the current state of healthcare with the implementation of the 10 Year Health Plan, it will be important to focus on empowering people to utilise access points at pharmacies whilst also recognising in some circumstances that it may be appropriate to see a GP.

As the Government look to reform the current state of healthcare, it will be important to focus on empowering people to utilise access points at pharmacy whilst also recognising in some circumstances that it may be appropriate to see a GP. The 10 Year Health Plan aims to integrate pharmacy services into a new Neighbourhood Health Service. In the implementation of this it will be important to ensure pharmacists play a more significant role in influencing the health choices people make to help them move from choosing GPs and A&E for self-treatable conditions to self-care.

The data also reveals that some of these conditions impacting women appear to be the hardest to secure GP appointments for, with over half of adults (54%) experiencing menopause who sought a GP's support sharing that they found it difficult or very difficult to see a doctor about the condition. The same is true for heavy menstrual bleeding with 36% saying they found it difficult or very difficult to get an appointment, and 4% claimed it was impossible to get an appointment.

It is also interesting to note that amongst the top common conditions experienced in the year, it appears to be younger adults under the age of 35 that are more likely to seek a GP appointment than older generations, who may have more experience of self-treating a minor health condition. For example, 9% of 18-24 year olds sought a GP appointment for a blocked nose and coughs versus 3% and 1% respectively of over 65s, and similarly 14% of adults aged 25-34 sought a GP appointment for allergies (e.g. hay fever) compared to 3% of over 65s.


 **32%** of respondents that experienced a urinary tract infection (UTI) went to their GP

 down from **56%** in 2024

On the other hand, we can see a downward turn compared to previous years in the number of people across the board who experienced urinary tract infections (UTIs) seeking advice and treatment from their GP - 56% in 2024 compared to 32% in 2025. This corresponds with an increase in the number of people visiting their pharmacist for advice and treatment for this condition, which has climbed 5 percentage points this year. This is a positive trend and could reflect the Pharmacy First pathway where GP surgeries refer women with UTIs to the pharmacy for treatment, or potentially an increase in awareness and uptake for Pharmacy First services by women consumers aged 16-64 who can receive treatment from a pharmacist for a UTI outside of a GP surgery and GP hours.

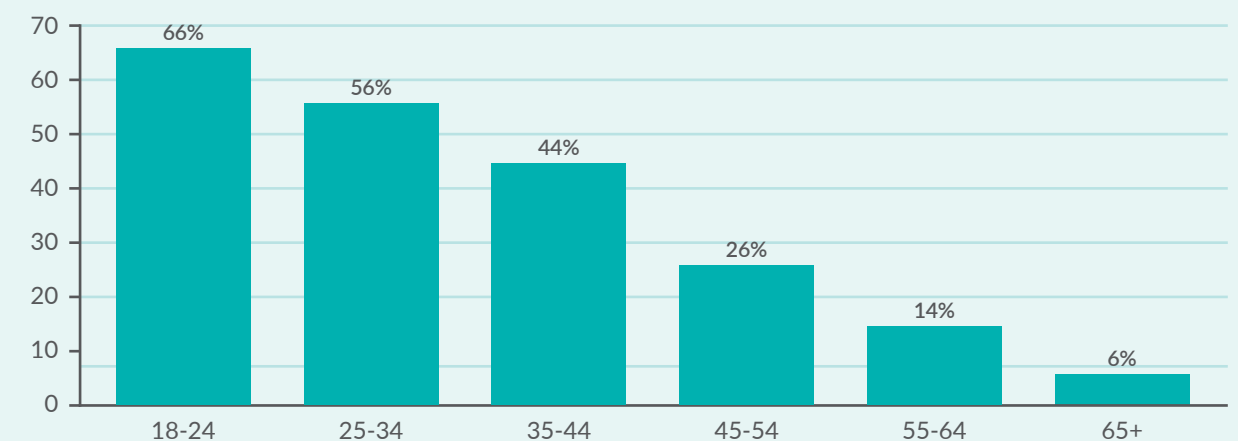
Self care in the community

The census has revealed that, on average, 38% of adults have been referred to consult with a pharmacist by their GP surgery or NHS 111 services in the last year for their self-treatable condition. For some conditions, this could likely be as a result of GP surgeries following Pharmacy First pathways. Interestingly, it appears that it is the younger generation that are more likely to be referred to consult with a pharmacist with 66% of 18-24 year olds being directed to do so compared to just 14% of adults aged 55-64. This is even lower for adults aged 65+ at 6%, however, they may be more likely to be living with comorbidities and therefore referred with more caution.¹

 **19%** of 18-24 year olds would not visit a pharmacist before a GP in case it was serious

 **18%** don't see pharmacists as being qualified as GPs or hospital staff

Referred to a pharmacist by GP or NHS 111



One possible reason for this could be that younger patients have less experience of self-caring for an illness and so may be more likely to seek primary care support for a self-treatable condition that a pharmacist could advise on as a first port of call. Supporting this finding, the data reveals that there is also a significant difference in attitudes between generations with young adults aged 18-24 years old 31% less likely to choose to visit a pharmacist as a first step for healthcare than those over 65. Of those 18-24 year olds that would not visit their pharmacist as their first option, 19% said they would rather go to a GP in case it is serious and 18% said they don't see pharmacists as being as qualified as GPs or hospital staff.



Mark Burdon, pharmacist and advisor to PAGB, shares:

“Community pharmacists are highly trained healthcare professionals who can provide support, advice and treatments for all age ranges. It's concerning to see that younger adults don't have the same awareness and trust in these services as older generations - who are likely to be more experienced and confident in practising self-care - and it needs to be addressed to ease the already too heavy burden on primary care services.”

Pharmacy services deliver care closer to home, helping to reduce unnecessary GP and hospital attendances. They also offer an important reminder that self-care doesn't have to be practised in isolation; it may involve support and advice from others, such as expert pharmacy teams.”

1. <https://evidence.nihr.ac.uk/alert/multi-morbidity-predicted-to-increase-in-the-uk-over-the-next-20-years/>

This year’s census reveals that while trust in pharmacists remains relatively high, with an average of 67% of adults agreeing that they are a trustworthy source of healthcare information, there is a continued decline in adults asking a pharmacist for advice about their symptoms as their first option for self-treatable conditions. Since 2022, this has fallen by 18 percentage points, from 69% in 2022 to 51% in 2025.

This significant fall in people seeking advice and treatment from pharmacists could be linked to the decline we have seen in confidence to self-care combined with a lack of awareness about the role pharmacists can play in supporting people to do so. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the immediate years following, visits to pharmacies as a first choice for healthcare were likely much higher due to their accessibility and being able to see a healthcare professional for advice at a time when NHS services were stretched beyond capacity. However, the recent decline in adults visiting their pharmacists suggests these behaviours did not embed.

Another reason for the decline in pharmacy visits may also relate to peoples’ access to pharmacy services. 15% of adults say that pharmacies close to them have closed within the last year, and of those almost 6 in 10 people (59%) say it is now harder to access non-prescription healthcare and advice. On average, 34% of those impacted say they now go to their GP instead of their pharmacist. Reduced access may also be exacerbating health inequalities and hitting individuals from a lower socioeconomic background harder. From the demographic with the lowest annual household income (less than £10,000 a year) that have been impacted by pharmacy closures, 51% of people said they now rely on their GP instead.

The insights that this census highlights should act as impetus for national policymakers to put pharmacy services front and centre when delivering on the Government’s commitment to tackle health inequalities as part of its 10 Year Health Plan, as well as its ambition to shift more care from hospital to the community. We have already seen some steps towards this with the launch of the Pharmacy First service in 2024 which allows community pharmacists to treat seven common conditions, including providing prescription-only medicines, without needing a GP appointment. However, our census

reveals that only 50% of people are aware of Pharmacy First services and that they can receive prescription treatment from community pharmacists following defined clinical pathways.

The CCA report that potentially over 9 million GP consultations a year could be transferred to community pharmacies under the current Pharmacy First service, for those currently eligible, and with targeted expansion, up to 40 million GP appointments could be safely transferred to pharmacies.¹



over 9 million

GP consultations per year could be transferred to community pharmacies under the current Pharmacy First service, for those currently eligible


Mark Burdon comments:

“Fully integrating pharmacy’s role in primary care is vital in creating a supportive self-care environment. There’s an opportunity wide open here to not only raise the visibility of pharmacy services to improve the public’s understanding of and confidence to self-care, but also to expand the eligibility criteria of the Pharmacy First service to reach more patients.

With our current processes, community pharmacists are only receiving a relatively small number of patients through Pharmacy First when we have the capacity and capabilities to be the first point of contact in seeking healthcare for many more. To ensure pharmacies are being utilised to their full potential in primary care, we need to see a dual approach of expanding pharmacy services and educating people on a national scale about the support pharmacists can provide.”

Focus on prevention

As the Government looks to reform health services to ease pressures on the NHS, self-care is central to supporting their ambitions for a more prevention-focused system, by promoting early intervention and improving health and well-being. However, there’s still a further way to go to achieve this. This year’s census found that almost 1 in 5 people (17%) chose to do nothing to treat the self-treatable conditions they experienced in the year, hoping their condition would get better on its own.

 Top self-treatable conditions that people chose not to treat (by total volume)
1. Bruises
2. Blocked nose
3. Cold
4. Cough
5. Diarrhoea
6. Headache
7. Sore throat
8. Backache
9. Constipation
10. Cuts or open wounds

Dr Binita Kalaria comments:

“Choosing to ignore a common, easily treatable health condition can prolong symptoms and, in a small number of cases, sometimes lead to a more serious illness. By effectively treating a common condition at an earlier stage, whether through use of OTC medicines or other appropriate self-care, in most cases people can prevent worsening of symptoms, avoid unnecessary GP appointments, and more importantly improve their quality of life.”

OTC medicines are used by millions of people in the UK every day, helping people care for themselves, supporting them to go about their daily lives, and treating their health conditions. This year’s census found that over 6 in 10 adults (63%) agreed they were able to work and miss fewer days off work when unwell by using over-the-counter medicines to manage their symptoms.

According to Frontier Economics’ 2023 report on ‘The economic impact of over-the-counter products in the UK’, self-care and OTC products help employees avoid lost work hours by eliminating the need to visit the GP or A&E during work hours for treatment when they are sick, equating to £18 billion annual savings with 164 million avoided lost work days per year. This is equal to 5 days a year where employees rely on OTC products to work.

To maximise the impact of self-care and realise its full potential, the Government must embed self-care throughout the health and care system. Increasing access to information about self-care and where and how people can find advice and treatments could have a significant impact on how people approach their self-treatable conditions. Including self-care in Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) in schools and in the training of health and care professionals will be key to building confidence and capability across generations and the workforce.

1. <https://thecca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/The-Future-of-Pharmacy-First.pdf>

SECTION 4: Desire for Digital Self-Care

The NHS recognises that they have a number of challenges to address in the digital space and that improving use of technology across health and care could have a big impact on services in the future.

The 10 Year Health Plan sets out the Government's ambitions to transform the NHS App into the 'front door' of the NHS, supporting people to access care in the right setting the first time. This presents a great opportunity for self-care and the consumer healthcare sector to support this shift, as the relationship between products, services, and digital tools has become increasingly integrated. Consumer healthcare brands have existing websites and platforms set up with self-care information shared in simple, understandable ways to support people to use their products and care for their self-treatable conditions.

Over 6 in 10 people (62%) use the internet to look up their symptoms for self-treatable conditions, and younger generations are also turning to social media with 44% of

25-34 year olds saying they view this as a trusted source of healthcare information.

However, 43% of the population say they feel overwhelmed by the amount of health information that is available online, and 48% wish they understood more about how to spot 'fake' health information. Health literacy also plays a role in people's confidence using digital tools to self-care with 56% of people with no formal education sharing that they are not confident knowing how to find accurate and trustworthy health information online. This is a significant difference when compared to the 72% of people educated to a university undergraduate degree level who agree that they do feel confident.

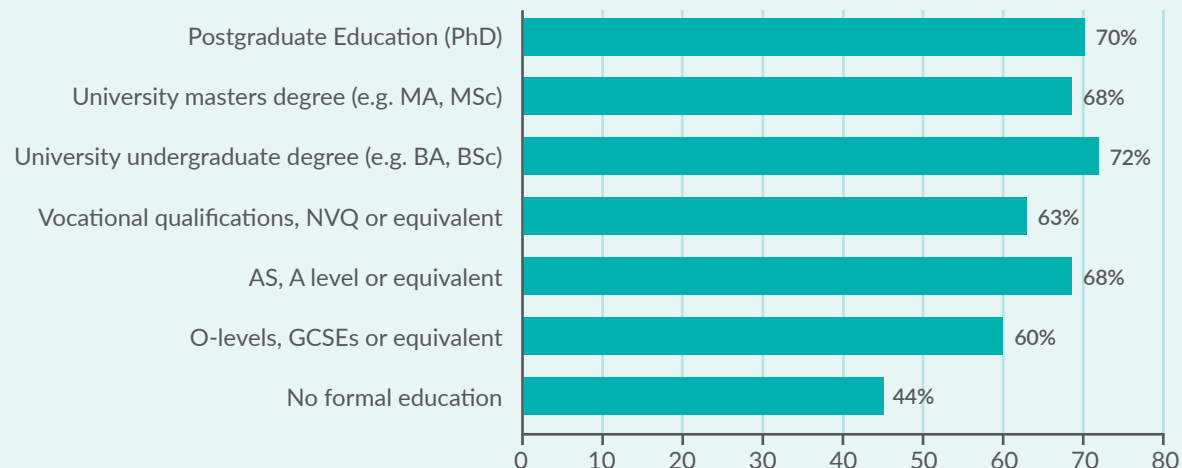


62% of people use the internet to look up their symptoms for self-treatable conditions



43% of people say they feel overwhelmed by the amount of health information online

Confident finding accurate and trustworthy health information online



82% of respondents said they trust the NHS Website or App as sources of information on self-care

Encouragingly, the NHS Website and App appear to be a stalwart for most people when it comes to accessing healthcare information online, with 82% of adults saying they trust these platforms as sources of information on self-care. Similarly, people are also using OTC brands' websites as sources of healthcare information, with 62% of people saying they use these sites each year.

Michelle Riddalls OBE comments:

“Brands are trusted for the healthcare information they provide alongside their products, which is a hugely important part in educating the public about self-care. We're also seeing more over-the-counter medicines supported by digital tools such as apps offering symptom tracking, personalised advice, or reminders to support adherence, such as the Nicorette Stop Smoke & Vape app.

Consumer healthcare brands invest time, money and research to ensure that the information, guidance and content offered through their digital channels is engaging and trustworthy.”



49% said they would trust a online source if recommended on the NHS Website or App



80% said they would be more likely to use the NHS Website and App over other online sources if they had a special self-care section

In fact, 49% of adults in this year's survey said they would trust a website or online source more if they were recommended it on the NHS Website or NHS App, and 80% said they would be more likely to use the platforms over other online sources if there was a special self-care section showing symptoms, treatments you can buy at a pharmacy and self-care advice. Half of all adults surveyed (50%) also agreed that by using a self-care hub they would likely reduce the number of visits they make to a healthcare provider for non-urgent issues.

A key announcement in the Government's 10 Year Health Plan is the move to a 'digital-by-default' service with an overhaul of the NHS App to support this. Individuals will have access to advice, guidance, self-care support and appointment management via the NHS App. Plans for the NHS App also include directing patients to well-evidenced consumer healthcare products to support their self-care where appropriate.

Michelle adds:

“This is a major step forward and reflects a long-standing PAGB ask. The shift towards a digital-first model of care will be key in supporting timely access to reliable health information and encouraging people to manage self-treatable conditions at home. Brands have existing digital resources with information about self-care that are engaging and easy to understand and signposting consumers to these from the NHS App will enable broader access to self-care.

The 10 Year Health Plan reinforces the importance of digital tools in tackling health inequalities and breaking down barriers to care. These commitments reflect our long-standing position that digital innovation must play a central role in supporting people to self-care.

Building peoples' confidence to self-care through easily accessible, timely information can help to overcome health disparities and improve health literacy. This will empower people to be more knowledgeable and active in their own health, relieving pressure across the healthcare system.”

A key announcement in the Government's 10 Year Health Plan is the move to a 'digital-by-default' service with an overhaul of the NHS App to support this.



The Self-Care Census 2025:

Exploring consumer trends in self-treatable conditions and self-care practices

Final word

The trends and insights revealed in this year's annual census help underscore a pivotal moment for the integration of self-care into a national healthcare system primed for reform. The findings provide evidence for the current challenges concerning people when it comes to caring for their self-treatable conditions and they highlight the opportunities to reshape how individuals' access and engage with healthcare services.

Michelle Riddalls, OBE shares:

“Self-care is an essential pillar of the healthcare system in the UK. Not only does it empower individuals to manage their minor health conditions independently, but it is also key to reducing the strain on primary care services. And yet, it's clear from this year's census that the nation is facing a crisis of confidence when it comes to self-care.

On the one hand, it is really positive to see growing support for self-care and recognition from the public that the NHS is busy and under-resourced. There is a willingness from individuals to take control of their health and well-being, but there's an essential piece of the puzzle missing from our current healthcare system: equipping people with the confidence and tools to do this.”

The census highlights that attitudes towards self-care aren't translating to people's actions when it comes to seeking treatment or advice for their self-treatable conditions. We're seeing a continued reliance on NHS front line services for minor health conditions, a lack of awareness and understanding about the best pathways to follow from younger generations, and a concerning difference in attitudes and access to healthcare across different demographics which reveals notable health inequalities.

Michelle continues:

“Realising the full potential of self-care will have a significant impact - not just for patients and the health service, but for the wider economy. As the Government seeks to create a truly modern healthcare system that reflects the evolving needs of our population, we need to see policies put into practice that prioritise self-care and improve access to OTC medicines to help reduce the burden on the front door of the NHS.

The 10 Year Health Plan marks an important step forward in recognising the valuable role that self-care plays within our healthcare system. Self-care is recognised as a core enabler of the Government's three key shifts: from treatment to prevention, from hospital to community, and finally, from analogue to digital.

To enable the successful implementation of the 10 Year Health Plan, it will be key to address the current health literacy gaps with better access to reliable resources, improved education and awareness, and investment in trusted digital tools. Utilising existing self-care resources from well-evidenced consumer healthcare brands and signposting these from the NHS App will not only provide a solution for this but will support even more people to access self-care information.

The planned Neighbourhood Health Service will help underpin a robust healthcare system infrastructure that empowers individuals to self-care with the integration and expansion of pharmacy services to alleviate pressures on the NHS.”

Mark Burdon comments:

“Pharmacies are uniquely positioned to bridge the gaps we see in health literacy and access to over-the-counter (OTC) medicines. Pharmacies often have extended opening hours with services available in the evenings and weekends, helping people to have rapid and convenient access to medicines and trusted healthcare advice to support them to self-care. Ensuring that patients feel empowered and assured in managing self-treatable conditions with the assistance of pharmacy services is an actionable and transformative strategy for the future of healthcare.”

Michelle concludes

“Ultimately, building a supportive environment that equips people with the confidence and resources to manage self-treatable conditions effectively is what will ensure the long-term sustainability of our healthcare system. We look forward to working with the Government and the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure the ambitions around self-care in the 10 Year Health Plan are fully realised in practice.”



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