



Leaflet: Minor ailments

Minor ailments

Research shows that people cope with their own symptoms in eight out of ten cases. You probably already act as your own doctor and nurse most of the time. If you feel unwell, you immediately try to work out why and take steps to make yourself feel better. This is 'diagnosis' and 'treatment'. When you can't solve it yourself, that's when you go for medical help.

Self-care means recognising minor illnesses and being able to treat the symptoms, preventing health problems developing and knowing when to call for outside medical help. People often worry that any symptom is the sign of a serious illness when it is much more likely to be something very simple.

People recover from most minor illnesses by themselves and don't need to be seen by a doctor. For instance, many minor illnesses, including colds and flu, are caused by a virus. There are thousands of different viruses and there is no direct cure (antibiotics can't help). But there are often things you can do to ease the symptoms while your body gets on with overcoming the virus. Rest and take plenty of drinks (not alcohol). Paracetamol or aspirin may help relieve aches and fever, but don't give aspirin to children under the age of 12.

With a little more knowledge and information, you may be able to diagnose and treat yourself and members of your family a lot of the time. Some basic knowledge of first aid (for example, for burns, sprains or reviving people) can help you deal with accidents. You can then decide whether something is serious enough to need medical help.

Self-care doesn't mean dealing with health problems on your own. Your GP and the practice team are there to help with any problems or situations you can't cope with. The pharmacist can give you advice on treating minor illnesses.

Your GP, health authority or pharmacist may have free booklets on minor illnesses and how to deal with them. These booklets describe clearly how to recognise the symptoms of common illnesses and complaints, what you can do about them and when to call for help from a GP or other health care workers.

There are also information helplines you can ring. Ask at your local library, or contact the health authority (listed in the telephone directory), a pharmacist or your GP's surgery about getting a booklet and more information on self-care.

The pharmacist can help you stock your home medicine chest and can advise you on home remedies. Organisations such as the British Red Cross and St John Ambulance provide first aid information and courses.

Keep medicines away from children

First Aid

Burns

Immediately cool down the affected area with lots of cold water and continue to do this for at least 10 minutes. If the burn is larger than 4 or 5 inches across, if it is on the face or if the skin is broken, see the nurse at your GP's practice as soon as possible. If the burn is deep, heavily blistered and very painful, or if the skin has turned white or black, go to the nearest Accident and Emergency (Casualty) department immediately.

Cuts

Try to stop the bleeding from a minor cut by pressing it, with clean hands, for a few minutes; hold a cut arm or leg up high. If a cut bleeds freely any germs will normally be washed away by the blood. If it is a deep cut and the edges cannot be pulled together, consult your GP's surgery or go to the Accident and Emergency department. Redness or swelling can be a sign of infection in a cut or graze and you should make an appointment to have it seen at your GP's surgery. You may be advised to have a tetanus injection if you haven't had one for 10 years.

Sprains

Remember **I-C-E**.

I stands for **ice**. Immediately pack the sprained area with ice or a bag of frozen peas, wrapped in a cloth, to reduce swelling and speed up the healing process. Keep this on for about 20 minutes.

C means **compression**. Bind the injured area with an elastic bandage, so it is well supported, but not so tight that it restricts the flow of blood. Retighten a few times a day.

E means **elevation**. Rest the sprained area and keep it held high. For example, if you have a sprained ankle, rest it on a stool that is higher than the chair you are sitting on.

Head injuries

For a minor knock or bump, put on a cold damp cloth. A person should be seen by a GP or taken to Accident and Emergency without delay if they have any of the following symptoms: vomiting, unconsciousness, double vision, drowsiness or confusion.

Choking

Stand behind the person and hug them firmly above the waist, pushing your fist up under their ribs to make them cough up the blockage. For a young child, hold the child upside down and thump on the back.

The recovery position

This is a position in which to place a person who is unconscious. Turn the person on to their side, with the head turned to one side. Then bring the top leg over so that it is resting on the ground. This will prevent the person from vomiting and choking.

Changing your lifestyle

The way we live can affect our health. Lifestyle changes giving up smoking, cutting down on heavy drinking, learning to relax or reducing our intake of fatty foods can have a big impact on our health. Some GP surgeries run clinics on things like how to improve diet, cut down on smoking, take up exercise or reduce stress.

Ask your local practice if any of these clinics are offered, or if there is anywhere nearby where you can find one. There are also free leaflets and other materials about preventive health published by organisations such as the Health Education Authority. Ask for them at your GP's surgery, the pharmacy, or the health authority.

Testing services

There are tests and checks that you can have done to help prevent illnesses developing or to catch them in the early stages when they are most easy to treat. Some illnesses show no early symptoms and simple checks at regular intervals can sometimes detect any warning signs. GP surgeries offer testing and advice on such things as:

- ◆ blood pressure (to prevent strokes and heart attacks)
- ◆ cervical smears (to prevent cervical cancer)
- ◆ keeping up to date with immunisations.

Relatives of people with *glaucoma* (high pressure in the eye) can have eye pressure measured regularly by opticians if they are over 40. This is a free service also available to people with diabetes.

Medical advice by telephone

You can usually get medical advice over the telephone. Ring your GP's surgery for a phone consultation with the doctor or nurse. The receptionist may take a message for your GP to phone you back. You can also phone for advice and reassurance in urgent situations at night and weekends.

Some people tend to ignore symptoms when they feel unwell. People who are looking after others, whether they are parents with a family or carers looking after someone who is ill or disabled, often tend to neglect their own health. Some older people think pains and problems are just a sign of old age. And men are particularly likely to ignore warning signs and not go to the surgery for simple checks or consultations with their GP. A quick phone call or visit can reassure you or ensure that a problem is caught early and receives effective treatment.

Check the practice leaflet or ask at reception to find out more.

Warning signs

These warning signs may tell you something is wrong and that you should contact the GP soon.

- ◆ Losing weight by seven pounds (three kilograms) or more without obvious reason
- ◆ Feeling thirsty without obvious reason
- ◆ Feeling very tired or exhausted without good reason
- ◆ Losing blood when coughing or vomiting or going to the toilet
- ◆ A change in a mole (changing colour, getting bigger or thicker, itching or bleeding)
- ◆ A change in the voice (getting husky or hoarse and continuing that way for more than three weeks)
- ◆ Indigestion or belching acid, lasting more than a month (especially in the over-45s)
- ◆ A change in a breast or nipple.

Danger signs

In children, these warning signs mean you should get medical advice immediately.

- ◆ Violet-coloured spots that don't fade when pressed
- ◆ Breathing difficulties gulping, gasping, wheezing and being unable to speak or drink
- ◆ The child seems to be in pain when breathing in
- ◆ The child is weak, drowsy or confused and doesn't react to you or its surroundings
- ◆ The child is vomiting a lot and seems ill
- ◆ The child cannot sit up or bend the head forward.

How to treat a temperature

A raised temperature often occurs even with mild infections like colds and flu. Normal temperature is 37°C or 98.4°F. People usually know if they have a temperature they feel hot or cold, sweaty or shivery, and unwell. Children may be miserable and listless or look flushed. Small babies may seem very sleepy and not want to feed.

A higher temperature or fever means the body is fighting the infection. Help it along by drinking plenty of water or weak squash, keeping the room at a comfortable temperature with fresh air circulating, and sponging with cool or lukewarm water. Paracetamol or aspirin can be taken as tablets by adults and paracetamol syrup can be given to children.

Contact the GP immediately if the person has a temperature of over 40°C or 104°F, if there is a stiff neck, cramps or vomiting, or if a child seems weak and listless or suffers a fit or convulsion.

Useful items for stocking your home medicine chest

- ◆ Paracetamol syrups (e.g. Calpol, Disprol, etc) for pain or fever in children. See the label for the correct dose for the age of child

- ◆ Paracetamol or aspirin for adults and teenagers for headaches, colds, fever, sore throats and pain. Do not give aspirin to children under 12 years old
- ◆ Cough medicines
- ◆ Menthol crystals add to hot water according to the instructions and inhale the steam to treat catarrh and dry, painful coughs or sinusitis. Not suitable for children use a steam-filled bathroom instead.
- ◆ Calamine lotion for dabbing on insect bites, sunburn, stings and itches
- ◆ Antiseptic solution one teaspoonful mixed with warm water for cleaning cuts and grazes
- ◆ Rehydration mixture (e.g. Dioralyte) for use in cases of diarrhoea or vomiting
- ◆ Plasters a mixture of sizes
- ◆ Cotton wool to clean cuts and grazes
- ◆ An elastic bandage and dressings to support sprains or bruises
- ◆ A thermometer for taking temperatures
- ◆ Tweezers for removing splinters.

All these are useful medicines and dressings to keep at home in readiness for minor illnesses or accidents. Ask your pharmacist for advice on other remedies or medicines which may be of use at home. Keep them up to date and out of the reach of children.

[Return to top](#)