



# Taking care, taking control: Self-Care Attitudes 2022

**PAGB**

The Consumer Healthcare Association

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# Foreword

Our latest self-care survey examines people's attitudes to self-care and how this influences their behaviour. Our findings show that the public want to embrace self-care but need the tools and infrastructure to help them to do this. Two thirds of people (64%) who do not already use self-care as their main option would like to do so. Four in five people (79%) think that people should take more responsibility for their own health. A majority of respondents (81%) believe we need more self-care education and three quarters (73%) believe that the NHS should self-care for self-treatable conditions easier.

The pandemic has been the biggest instigator in encouraging both the Government's messaging and promotion of self-care and the public's willingness to actively self-care. We now have a unique opportunity to embed self-care practises into the everyday behaviours of the public but we need appropriate policies in place to encourage and enable self-care for self-treatable conditions. Our results suggest that there has been a shift away from self-care and people may be falling back into pre-pandemic behaviours; there is a risk that we could miss this time-limited opportunity to embed self-care within our healthcare system.

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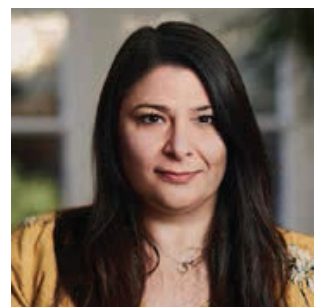
*We are now entering one of the most challenging winters for the NHS and the UK population. This will be the first winter where our health services will have to tackle both Covid-19 and seasonal flu. Worse still, the cost-of-living crisis means that many will struggle to heat their homes, potentially increasing the risk of these illnesses. Self-care presents an opportunity for people to take action on self-treatable conditions while also saving precious NHS resources.*

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There have been promising signs, recent plans from Ministers recognise pharmacists as the key workforce to help support people and to protect NHS resources. While this expert workforce is ready and willing to support self-care, the Government must ensure that pharmacies have the resources they need to continue to do their work.

We are concerned that opportunities have been missed. The long-awaited Health Disparities White Paper has been indefinitely kicked into the political long grass. It is essential that we do not lose sight of this important issue. In the likely absence of broader measures to tackle health disparities, there is an urgent need for action to promote self-care as a key part of the answer to improving health for those in greatest need; an answer which is proven and ready for the Government to implement now, if it is willing to act.

Self-care can empower people, reduce demand on the NHS, reduce health inequalities, and it can improve health outcomes. We need to create a system which fully integrates the promotion of self-care for self-treatable conditions; that's why we are calling for a national self-care strategy.



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**Michelle Riddalls**  
Chief Executive  
PAGB, the consumer  
healthcare association

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# Executive summary



We surveyed over 2,000 adults across the UK to ask about their attitudes to self-care and accessing health services. Our findings show that the public want to self-care. They believe that individuals should take responsibility for their health and that we need to protect NHS resources.

We asked people what conditions they felt confident in dealing with themselves and then what they had done, if they had experienced symptoms. High percentages of respondents said they felt confident in treating some self-treatable conditions, however, there is room for improvement. For example, more than half of respondents (52%) do not feel confident in treating backache and one in five people (23%) would not feel comfortable self-treating a headache.

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***One in eight people now look up their symptoms more frequently online than they did before the pandemic and people are reporting that they are increasingly able to find accurate information online. Pharmacists are the experts in the community who can help support people to self-care by providing accurate information and advice. Respondents support expanding the role of pharmacists so that this skilled workforce can be better utilised.***

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Worryingly, there has been a drop in the number of people who say that they are likely to self-care when compared to our 2020 survey. The number of respondents who use their community pharmacist as their first step in getting advice on self-treatable conditions has also dropped. Our findings suggest that people may be falling back into pre-pandemic behaviours and that there is a time-limited opportunity to embed the behavioural changes that people had embraced during the pandemic.

That's why PAGB is calling for the Government to develop a national self-care strategy that would encourage and support people's ability to self-care and facilitate an environment that would improve access to effective OTC treatments.

At PAGB, we will play our part and undertake further research to understand the barriers which prevent people from practising self-care and how the system can support people to feel confident in treating some self-treatable conditions.

# About the survey

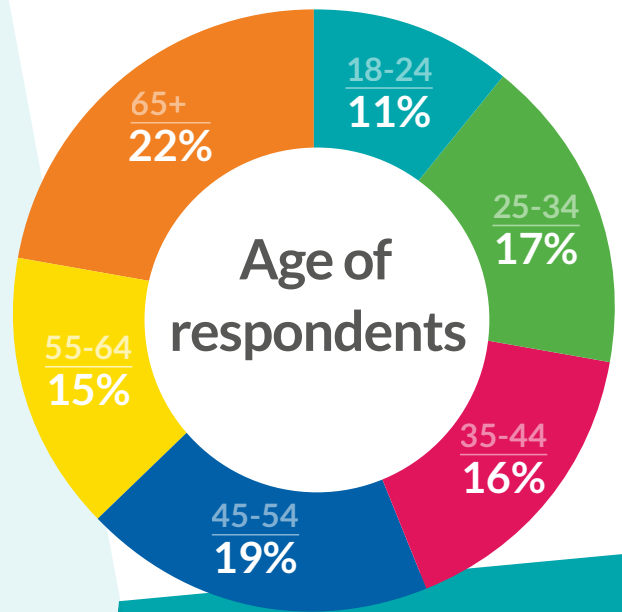
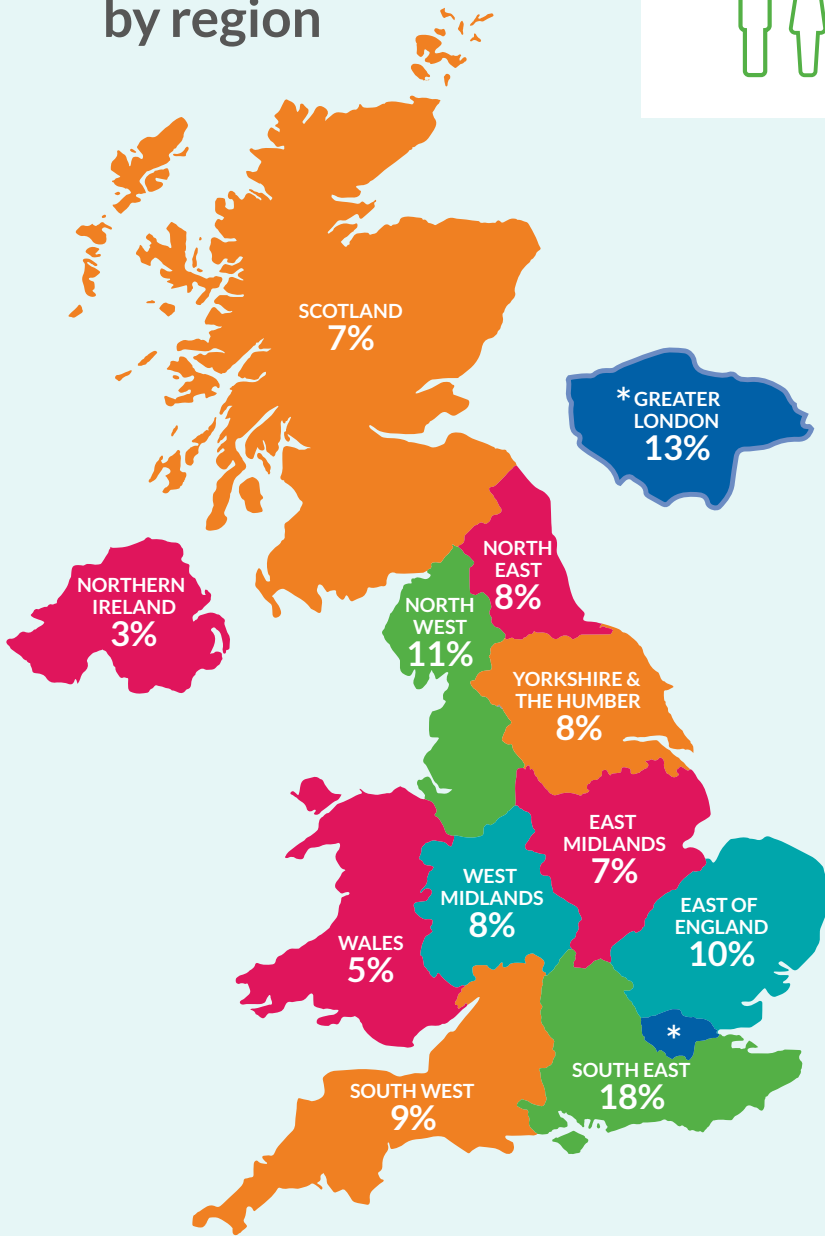
Self-Care  
survey  
2022

## Respondents by region



2,005  
adults  
surveyed

The survey of 2,005 UK adults was carried out by Pureprofile on behalf of PAGB.



## Employment status

- 38% Full time employed
- 14% Part time employed
- 6% Self employed
- 7% Homemaker
- 21% Retired
- 5% Student
- 10% Not currently employed



53% Female



47% Male

PAGB

Taking care, taking control:  
Self-Care Attitudes

# Introduction to self-care

Self-care is the action people take for themselves and their families to promote and maintain good health and wellbeing, and to take care of their self-treatable conditions. Self-care is not the absence of care, nor does it equate to a lack of care. It does not have to be practised in isolation and it may involve support and advice from others, such as expert pharmacy teams.

Self-care empowers people, enabling them to treat the symptoms of self-treatable conditions appropriately and effectively. It can protect vital NHS resources by reducing the number of unnecessary GP appointments and A&E attendances. It also narrows health inequalities and improves outcomes by equipping people across all socio-economic groups with the tools to treat themselves effectively and appropriately.

PAGB has undertaken a number of surveys to understand people's attitudes towards self-care before, during and after the pandemic. Our 2020 survey took place during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and looked to understand how people's experience of Covid-19 and the restrictions they were living under had affected their views on self-care. The findings revealed that A&E and GP services were less likely to be the first port of call for those with self-treatable conditions and more people chose to care for themselves.

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*We surveyed 2,005 adults across the UK to ask about their attitudes to self-care and accessing health services. This was an opportunity to find out if people remain committed to and confident in practising self-care.*

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# Attitudes to self-care and accessing health services



## Self-care first

Encouragingly, 35% of total respondents said that self-care was *always* their first option and that this is something they would continue to practise. We believe this number would be considerably higher if the Government and NHS worked together to develop the infrastructure required to support self-care.

Only 1% said they would never choose self-care as their first option. While this accounts for a very small number of individuals, it would be helpful to understand the reasons for such responses. By tackling the issues that stand in the way of self-care we can make it an accessible first option to a greater number of people.

## Impact of Covid-19

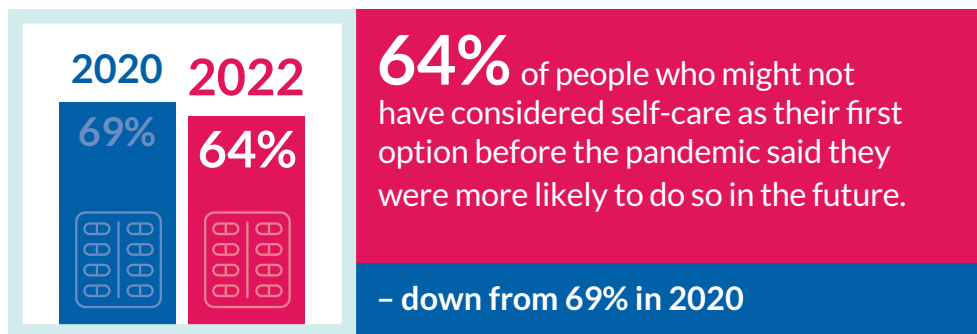
The pandemic has been a catalyst for change, encouraging both the Government's messaging and promotion of self-care and the public's willingness to actively self-care. It has changed people's attitudes in the way they access healthcare services. For example, respondents noted that they were more likely to self-care and speak to their pharmacist for advice.

Excluding the respondents who said they had always practised self-care. A majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their attitudes had shifted and they were more likely to choose self-care post pandemic. Two thirds (64%) of respondents who would have not considered self-care as their first option before the pandemic said they were more likely to do so in the future. Worryingly, this represents a drop in the number of people who would choose self-care when compared to our 2020 survey. Previously, 69% of people had indicated that post pandemic they would have considered self-care as their first option.

While the reduction in the figure is small, it does suggest that people may be falling back into pre-pandemic behaviours and that there is a time-limited opportunity to embed the changes people had embraced during the pandemic. Given the challenging winter ahead, the poor economic forecast and the Government's aspirations for the NHS, it is critical for the Government to act now in order to ensure the progress made in self-care is not lost.

*"I prefer to self-care or speak to a pharmacist"*

*"I am more likely to see a pharmacist or self-treat"*





## NHS resources

There is a strong and growing desire for people to be able to make more informed decisions about their own health and to avoid having to go to the doctor or hospital for self-treatable conditions. Four in five respondents (79%) said that people should take more responsibility for their own health and three quarters (73%) believe that the NHS should make self-treatment easier.

Before the pandemic, there were an estimated 18 million GP appointments and 3.7 million A&E visits every year for conditions which people could have treated themselves or for which a pharmacist should have been the first port of call.

Our findings show that three quarters (73%) agree that GP and A&E appointments should not be used for self-treatable conditions. This is necessary at a time when the health system is struggling under staff shortages, waiting lists and financial pressures. It is clear that a Government strategy that promotes self-care and protects NHS resources would be well received by the public.

## Accessing health services

**47%** agreed or strongly agreed that they were less likely to contact their GP as a first option down from 51% in our 2020 survey.

**32%** agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to ask a pharmacist for advice as their first option.

*“It is important to save NHS time and resources for those who really need it*

*“Think before taking any action that may waste GP and hospital staff time*

## PAGB recommendations and next steps:

PAGB is calling for the Government to develop a national self-care strategy that would encourage and support people's ability to self-care.

PAGB will undertake further research to understand the barriers which prevent people from practising self-care.

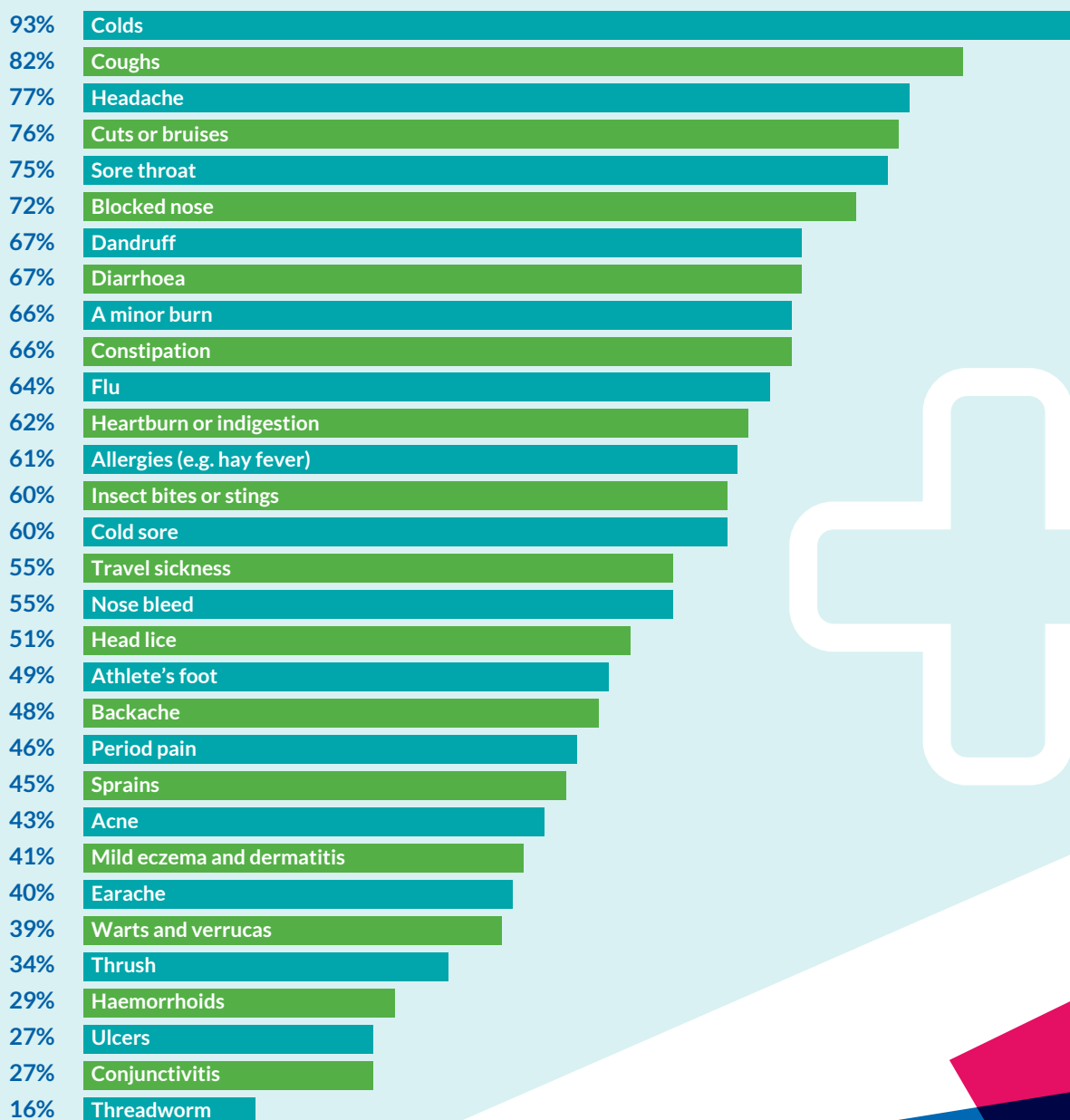


# Confidence to self-care

Individuals should understand and be willing to practise self-care, knowing how to take care of themselves and where to go when they are feeling unwell. We asked people what conditions they felt confident in dealing with themselves and then what they had done, if they had experienced symptoms.



Which of the following self-treatable conditions do you feel confident treating by yourself?



It is encouraging to see high percentages of respondents who feel confident in treating self-treatable conditions. As in previous years (2020 and 2021) colds and coughs continue to top the list of conditions that most people felt confident in treating by themselves. This is unsurprising given the Government advice during the pandemic to 'stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives,' combined with NHS advice to stay at home and self-treat mild to moderate Covid-19 symptoms. It also shows the value and impact coordinated public health care campaigns can have.

We can also see from the survey which self-treatable conditions people feel least confident treating by themselves. There is room for improvement, for example, more than half of respondents (52%) do not feel confident in treating backache and one in five people (23%) would not feel comfortable self-treating a headache. More research needs to be done to understand why this is the case so that we might overcome any challenges. Despite the high levels of confidence in treating some conditions, all these conditions can be treated by an individual without having to visit their GP.

## Health literacy and self-care education

*A majority of respondents (81%) believe we need more self-care education and 67% of people said that the NHS should make more information about self-care available online. An important part of self-care is about making healthcare understandable and accessible; only then will people feel confident in looking after their own health.*

## Top ten most commonly reported self-treatable conditions

Colds were the number one self-treatable condition that people reported experiencing in the past year. Interestingly, as a result of lockdown and the limited opportunities for viruses to spread, colds did not appear in the top ten list in 2020.

2022		2020	
Cold	60%	Headache	43%
Headache	54%	Backache	33%
Cough	48%	Allergies	32%
Backache	43%	Cuts or bruises	24%
Sore throat	38%	Heartburn/indigestion	20%
Cuts or bruises	35%	Diarrhoea	17%
Heartburn/indigestion	29%	Coughs	16%
Diarrhoea	27%	Constipation	16%
Allergies (e.g. hay fever)	25%	Period pain	16%
Constipation	24%	Sore throat	15%



## Confidence in over-the-counter medicines

A wide range of OTC medicines are available and can provide relief from the symptoms of many self-treatable conditions, such as coughs, colds and headaches. It is encouraging that 81% of respondents said they feel confident using OTC medicines and 74% believe more medicines should be available over-the-counter.

PAGB welcomes the steps that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has taken to widen the categories of medicines available over-the-counter. The reclassification and availability of two types of contraceptive pill (Hana and Lovima) from a prescription-only medicine to one that can be sold under the supervision of a pharmacist was a key moment in women's health. More recently, postmenopausal women can now access Gina, a vaginal hormone treatment, directly from pharmacies. This is the first time that any form of hormone replacement therapy has been made available for over-the-counter sale in the UK since it was first available in 1965.

These landmark reclassifications in women's health are favourable and a step in the right direction but more can be done to improve access to over-the-counter medicines. There is also an opportunity for the Government to work with industry on consumer-facing campaigns to empower people to self-treat where appropriate.



## PAGB recommendations and next steps:

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PAGB is calling for the Government to work with regulators such as the MHRA and industry to consider what condition areas might be appropriate for reclassification.

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PAGB will undertake more research to understand the reasons why people do not feel confident in treating some self-treatable conditions.

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# Access to digital information about self-care



The way people access information has been transformed by technology and the opportunity this presents for self-care is promising. The pandemic showed us just how rapidly behaviours can change when required. The NHS was able to provide digital and remote healthcare services for people to access the appropriate care and support they needed to treat and manage their health conditions. In 2021, the NHS app was the most downloaded free iOS app with over 24 million users.

One in eight people now look up their symptoms more frequently online than they did before the pandemic. As more people are consuming healthcare information online, it is essential that this information is reliable.

We are seeing a positive trend in the number of people who say they know how to find accurate information online and they can tell when online health information isn't trustworthy. However more people, than in our 2021 survey, reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of health information available online and say they wish they knew more about how to spot 'fake' health information.

The NHS boasts the world's largest integrated health system – a system that generates vast amounts of data. The Government sees an opportunity for innovation and wants to encourage and support the development of digital health and care products<sup>1</sup>. If this vision is to be fully realised, then a key focus must also be to provide the necessary tools required for people to find trustworthy information and guidance online.

## 69%

of people agreed slightly or strongly agreed that they know how to find accurate and trustworthy information online (up from 62% in 2021)

## 57%

agreed slightly or strongly agreed that they can usually tell when online health information isn't trustworthy (up from 54% in 2021)

## 42%

agreed slightly or strongly agreed that they get overwhelmed by the amount of health information available online (up from 34% in 2021)

## 47%

agreed slightly or strongly agreed that they wish they knew more about how to spot 'fake' health information (up from 37% in 2021)

## PAGB recommendations and next steps:

PAGB is calling on the NHS England's Transformation Directorate to evaluate the use of technologies that have been developed during the Covid-19 pandemic to promote greater self-care, and to clearly signpost to these products on NHS digital channels.

PAGB is working with policy, innovator and clinical stakeholders to explore how digital self-care can be enhanced.

# The role of pharmacy in supporting self-care

It is important that decisions about self-care can take place safely and with expert advice and input where necessary. Community pharmacists are well placed to drive a holistic approach to self-care. They can help to advise people on the most suitable and effective over-the-counter treatments as well as self-care techniques.

Less than half of respondents (44%) use community pharmacists as their first step in getting advice on self-treatable conditions – down from 47% in 2021. This suggests that people are slipping back into past behaviours. This is further exacerbated by the fact that we are not fully utilising the expertise of community pharmacies, and the existence of a number of barriers that prevent pharmacies from playing a bigger role.

## There is support for change:

**67%**

believe that pharmacists should be able to populate their medical records to mention the treatments they have provided – this would make 23% more people go to see a pharmacist.

**31%**

would be more likely to go to pharmacists if they could make direct referrals to other healthcare professionals.

**69%**

support the idea of GPs being able to make referrals to pharmacists – but only 18% have been, either by a GP or through NHS 111.



Our findings suggest there is confusion around whether pharmacists can see medical records. Almost six in ten people said pharmacists should be able to see medical records to provide better advice and that they would more likely seek advice from a pharmacist if that were the case (pharmacists can in fact see a limited summary of medical records but are not able to populate them).

NHS England recently released new figures which show the vital role that pharmacies are already playing in our health system. More than 100,000 patients were seen by their community pharmacist in just one month for self-treatable conditions and for those in need of medicines urgently.

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**Earlier this year, 118,123 people received a same-day consultation with their community pharmacist after calling NHS 111 or their GP practice – an increase of more than four-fifths (83%) when compared to the same time last year (2021)<sup>ii</sup>.**

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It is encouraging to see that the Community Pharmacist Consultation Service (CPCS) is expanding. People can now be referred to their community pharmacist for a same-day consultation via NHS 111 online, reducing the burden on people needing to call to call the NHS 111 phone line. Meanwhile, there are plans for a further expansion of the service in March 2023 to allow referrals from Urgent and Emergency Care settings for consultations with a pharmacist for self-treatable conditions and urgent medicine supply.

Recent Government plans recognise pharmacies as the key workforce to help protect NHS resources. This is a step in the right direction towards ensuring we have the infrastructure in place to make the NHS sustainable. It is, however, important to note that while pharmacies are ready, willing and have the expertise to support people to care for themselves, pharmacies need the resources to allow them to do this. Thousands of pharmacies are at risk of closure because they are insufficiently resourced. Should these closures take place, there would be a significant and detrimental effect on self-care.

## PAGB recommendations and next steps:

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Community pharmacists should be able to refer people directly and digitally to other healthcare professionals.

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PAGB is calling on the Government to work with pharmacy groups to develop ways for pharmacists to add to patients' medical records.

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PAGB is calling on the Government to ensure community pharmacies have the resources they need to continue to provide key services and support people to self-care safely.

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# Conclusion

Our self-care survey has shown that the public want to embrace self-care but need the tools and infrastructure to help them to do this. To that end, PAGB has been working with organisations and trade associations representing clinicians, pharmacies and commissioners to develop a clinical consensus on how best to support self-care. This work culminated in the development of a blueprint for a national self-care strategy for England. Our self-care survey has reaffirmed our position that the Government needs to adopt a self-care strategy to facilitate a self-care revolution; to empower people to manage their health and deliver significant and necessary savings to the NHS.

If the Government is willing to embrace self-care, the NHS could direct people with self-treatable conditions away from unnecessary GP and hospital visits. As Ministers look to best use pharmacists to help support people to care for themselves and to protect NHS resources – we must recognise that pharmacists are also under pressure, working under challenging circumstances and financial pressures; it is important they are suitably resourced in order to carry out their work.

The Department of Health and Social Care has said that the public will be called on to do their bit as part of a 'national endeavour' to support the NHS. Our survey has shown that the public want to play their part and take charge of their health.

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*The self-care survey has also shown that the pandemic has instigated a shift in attitudes towards health and self-care. People view self-care favourably and feel confident in taking care of themselves for common conditions such as colds, coughs and headaches. As our results show, the Government must act now to harness the positive move towards self-care and lock in the changes of this time-limited opportunity.*

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The need, support and opportunity for self-care has never been greater. All that is needed now is the political will to make it happen.

## References

- <sup>i</sup> Department for International Trade. Digital health and care guidance. December 2021, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-life-sciences-support/digital-health-and-care>
- <sup>ii</sup> NHS England. High street pharmacists treat thousands more people for minor illnesses. October 2022, available at <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2022/10/high-street-pharmacists-treat-thousands-more-people-for-minor-illnesses>

**PAGB**

New Penderel House  
283-288 High Holborn  
London WC1V 7HP

Registered in England and Wales  
Company no. 00375216  
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[www.pagb.co.uk](http://www.pagb.co.uk)

[info@pagb.co.uk](mailto:info@pagb.co.uk)  
[@PAGBselfcare](https://www.instagram.com/PAGBselfcare)



The Consumer Healthcare Association

PAGB, the consumer healthcare association, represents the manufacturers of branded OTC medicines, self care medical devices and food supplements in the UK.