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**When should I call a doctor?**

# **Minor illness**

## **How to Treat it at Home**



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# Introduction

General Practitioners (GPs) provide 24 hour care for their patients. This means GPs will run an out of hours service either themselves, by employing an on call doctors service, or by being part of an out of hours GP cooperative.

**The out of hours service is for urgent and serious medical problems.** It is important to use the service responsibly so that your doctor can see the patients who are most in need when the surgery is closed. If you genuinely need medical help, you should not be afraid to call your GP.

There are occasions when you can treat minor illnesses yourself, or they can wait until normal surgery hours.

## **This booklet will help you to know:**

- When you can treat yourself and save the doctor valuable time to help people who are more seriously ill.
- When you really need to see the doctor.

## **Before you call a doctor What you can do:**

- Try the appropriate treatments recommended in this booklet
- Think about how you feel
  - can you wait to see your doctor in normal surgery hours?
  - do you need advice or reassurance now?
  - do you need a doctor to see you now?
- Think about whether anyone else can help you, such as a pharmacist or a dentist

**In a real emergency you can be sure that a doctor will always be available to give you advice over the phone or to see you**

# Burns & Scalds

## What you can do:

- immediately run cold water on the burn and keep it there for 10 minutes (this will help to cool the burn and relieve the pain)
- do not remove clothing or anything else that sticks to the burn
- do not burst any blisters that form
- do not put on any creams

## Go to your nearest accident and emergency department if:

- the burn is large, covers a joint, is not painful to touch, is on a child, or if there is sickness, shivering or a temperature; and
- cover the burn area with ordinary kitchen clingfilm

# Chest Pains

Getting pains in the chest may be a symptom of a heart attack or it can be caused by other problems. Stabbing chest pain when you twist is usually your chest wall muscle and you can treat this with simple painkillers. Shooting pains which last a few seconds are usually not a cause of concern. If chest pain happens with a cough or fever, it can be a sign of pleurisy, in which case you should contact your doctor during normal surgery hours.

## Contact your doctor immediately if:

- you know you have a heart problem and have a nitrate spray or tablets, but after using these your symptoms do not settle within five minutes.

## Call 999 for an Ambulance if:

- the chest pain is severe and lasts for more than 10 minutes; and
- it spreads to your jaw or arm;
- you look pale or grey;
- you feel sick or cold;
- you sweat; or
- you become breathless.

**If you are in any doubt, contact your doctor**

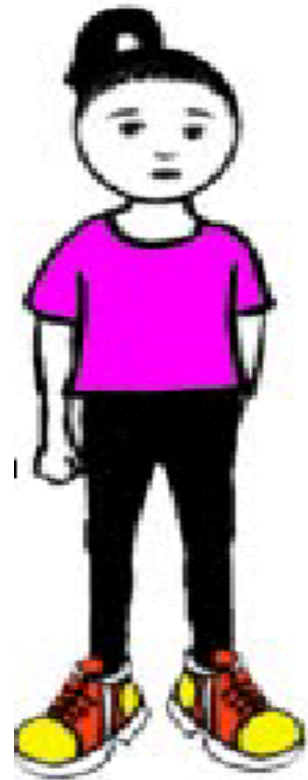
# Coughs

## Contact your doctor if:

- the coughing produces blood;
- if breathing is accompanied by a pain the chest, or shortness of breath;
- if your cough lasts more than two weeks;
- you have a high temperature and a cough lasting more five days;
- if a child with these symptoms is not swallowing.

## Call 999 for an Ambulance if:

- you have severe breathing difficulties;
- you notice that your child's lips are bluish in colour.



# Colds & Flu

A cold usually begins gradually, it makes you feel generally unwell and achy, and then produces a runny or blocked nose. After a day or two your nose runs with a clear liquid which then becomes thick and yellow. You may also have a sore throat, sneezing, a cough and a slight temperature. Symptoms may last 7-14 days. A cold is a viral illness which cannot be treated with antibiotics.

## What you can do:

- Drink plenty of fluids
- Alternate paracetamol and aspirin every 3 hours; this will ease your sore throat and muscle pains.
- Keep warm and rest
- Ask your pharmacist for advice on what over-the-counter medication would best treat your symptoms
- If you have children, ensure you have paracetamol suitable for children under 12 years and do not give children under 12 aspirin.

**continued...**

## ...Colds & Flu continued

If you are taking other medicines, always check with your pharmacist. Many cold and flu products already contain paracetamol. Using several products together is very dangerous. If you already have cold or flu medicine in the house, check that it has not passed its sell-by date.

## Diarrhoea

### Contact your doctor if:

- contact your doctors immediately if there is any blood with the diarrhoea
- a baby, or child with diarrhoea is drowsy or refuses to drink for a few hours
- you have a fever with the diarrhoea
- the diarrhoea lasts more than a week (more than two days in a child)
- you pass little or no urine over 12 hours (six hours in babies) or
- you think you have picked up a stomach bug from overseas

Diarrhoea is unpleasant but rarely dangerous. Its most usual cause is a sudden change of diet; over-eating; over-drinking or it can follow travel to a foreign country. Many attacks are caused by virus or bacterial infection.



Diarrhoea is often accompanied by a colicky (cramplike) pain in the tummy. It may also be preceded by vomiting.

### What you can do:

- Miss the next meal or two
- Drink plenty of clear fluids (water or squash)
- Take paracetamol for colic-like tummy pains
- Take rehydration medicine available from your pharmacist

# Earache

Earache can be caused by an infection or even by wax in your ear. If the cause is an infection you will usually have a temperature and feel 'flu-like'. Most infections clear within a few days, although you may not be able to hear properly for a short while after.

## What you can do:

- take regular painkillers, such as paracetamol or Ibuprofen.

## Contact your doctor if:

- the earache continues for more than 12 hours after taking painkillers
- the ear starts running;
- the deafness continues for more than a few days after the infection has cleared.

# Insect Bites & Stings

## What you can do:

- For wasp stings, bathe the area in vinegar
- For bee stings, remove the sting and bathe the area in baking soda and water mixture
- Rub calamine lotion or other soothing creams on the area

**Serious stings are rare. They happen if you are allergic to bee or wasp stings or you are stung on the tongue or throat. Some people can be severely allergic to insect bites or stings.**

**If you have a severe allergic reaction, call 999 for an ambulance**

# Meningitis

Most people become very worried when they hear the word 'meningitis'. In fact, single cases are rare and clusters are even rarer. The illness develops very quickly. Specific symptoms of meningitis include one or more of the following:

- high temperature or fever;
- cold hands and feet when the rest of the body is burning;
- vomiting;
- severe headache;
- stiff neck;
- dislike of bright lights ;
- a bruising rash.

The rash usually starts as small red or purple pin pricks Which then join to form red and purple blotches.



**If you think you or your child has meningitis, you should contact your doctor immediately or call 999 for an Ambulance.**

# Sore Throats

Most sore throats are caused by virus infection which antibiotics cannot cure. The sore throat will usually disappear in a few days.

## What you can do:

- to help relieve the pain on swallowing and if there is a temperature, take regular painkillers, such as paracetamol
- drink plenty of cold drinks.

**ASPIRIN MUST NOT BE GIVEN TO CHILDREN UNDER 12 YEARS OF AGE**

**continued...**

## ...Sore Throats continued

### Contact your doctor if:

- you have severe problems swallowing
- you have severe breathing difficulties
- the problem lasts for more than three days
- you also have severe earache
- your temperature rises above 38.6°C or 101°F

## Toothache

Your doctor is not trained to deal with dental problems. Dentists do not work in Accident and Emergency departments. If you have toothache, or an abscess in your mouth, especially if you have swelling around the tooth, you should contact your dentist.

### What you can do:

- Take regular painkillers, such as paracetamol;
- Contact your dentist during normal surgery hours.

Unlike registration with your family doctor, registration with your NHS dentist only lasts for 15 months. It is therefore important that you attend regularly to maintain your registration.



# General

It is sometimes possible to be ill even though you do not actually feel unwell. You should contact your doctor during normal surgery hours within ten days if you notice any of the following:

- feeling very tired for no apparent reason
- losing significant weight for no apparent reason
- feeling very thirsty a lot of the time for no apparent reason
- changes in colour, texture or size to a mole on your skin
- persistent indigestion or heartburn
- loss of blood when you cough, vomit, pass water or from your bowels
- changes to your voice - hoarseness or huskiness for no apparent reason

# Medicine Cabinet

You should always keep any medicines you have at home in a safe place, preferably in a locked cabinet.

**Keep your medicines out of the reach of children**  
**Always read labels carefully and follow the instructions**  
**Make sure medicines are not out of date**

Some useful suggestions of items you might wish to keep in your medicine cabinet:

Paracetamol Syrup (for children)  
Rehydration Medicine  
Scissors  
Tweezers  
Bandages  
Cottonwool  
Indigestion Relief

Plasters  
Safety Pins and Tape  
Thermometer  
Antiseptic Cream  
Calamine Lotion  
Cough Mixture  
Paracetamol

# NHS Direct

NHS Direct is a 24 hour telephone helpline. The helpline is staffed by nurses who can help reassure you and give you telephone advice and health information. Anyone can ring NHS Direct, at any time, for health advice.

If you feel that there is something wrong with you or someone you are calling about, a NHS Direct nurse will be able to help you and:

- tell you whether the symptoms can be managed safely at home and advise you on what to do to treat yourself or the person you are worried about
- advise you if you do need to seek further help from a medical professional and direct you to the right service. In an emergency the nurse can also transfer you directly to the ambulance service.

NHS Direct is staffed by experienced nurses who are specially trained to give advice over the phone. They will ask you a series of questions, which will help them decide how serious your problem is.

