

## Position statement on prescribing of remedies for the symptomatic treatment of self-limiting coughs, colds and nasal congestion on prescription

**In line with NHS England's guidance on conditions for which over-the-counter items should not be routinely prescribed, SW London CCGs\* do not support the routine prescribing of preparations for the symptomatic treatment of coughs and colds on prescription for adults or children.**

Products that will not be routinely prescribed include aromatic inhalations, vapour rubs, cough suppressants/ expectorants, demulcents, lozenges, systemic nasal decongestants and many other branded and unbranded over-the-counter (OTC) or general sales list (GSL) preparations.

### Rationale

- There is insufficient high quality evidence to support the prescribing of symptomatic treatments for coughs and colds.<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- **Systemic decongestants** are not as effective as local preparations but both have their limitations for benefit and potential for adverse reactions.<sup>1</sup>
- **Oral decongestants** may relieve nasal congestion in the short term, but this effect does not extend past a few days and have sympathomimetic effects.<sup>1</sup> They also have a potential for abuse to enhance the effects of illicit drugs.
- **Intranasal decongestants** have fewer stimulatory side-effects but can give rise to rebound nasal congestion on withdrawal after prolonged use.<sup>1</sup>
- **Expectorants** claim to promote the expulsion of bronchial secretions. However, claims are not proven and there is no evidence that any OTC or GSL product is able to do this.<sup>1</sup>
- **Antitussives** have a limited role in chronic cough of no identifiable pathology, where the cough is significantly impacting on quality of life. However, in self-limiting coughs and colds there is no evidence to support routine use.<sup>1</sup> An acute cough is a natural response to keep the airways clear whilst the body fights infection and it is normal for a cough to linger for 3-weeks after the virus has cleared.
- These products are readily available for purchase in community pharmacies, supermarkets and many other retail stores. If the patient wishes to use OTC or GSL preparations then they can be sign-posted to pharmacies for further advice, where appropriate.

### References

1. British National Formulary (BNF) 72. Cough and Congestion, Chapter 3.4, pages 270-271
2. <https://www.gov.uk/drug-safety-update/over-the-counter-cough-and-cold-medicines-for-children>
3. <https://cks.nice.org.uk/common-cold/#scenario>
4. <https://www.gov.uk/drug-safety-update/codeine-for-cough-and-cold-restricted-use-in-children>
5. <http://www.mhra.gov.uk/home/groups/s-par/documents/websiteresources/con096798.pdf>
6. <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/birth-five>

Further information available from:

- NHS England. Conditions for which over the counter items should not routinely be prescribed in primary care: Guidance for CCGs. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/conditions-for-which-over-the-counter-items-should-not-routinely-be-prescribed-in-primary-care-guidance-for-ccgs/> Updated 18<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

\*SWL CCGs (NHS Croydon CCG, NHS Kingston CCG, NHS Merton CCG, NHS Richmond CCG and NHS Sutton CCG) position statement on prescribing of preparations for symptomatic relief of coughs and colds on prescription

## Guidance and recommendations for clinicians

- There is insufficient high quality evidence to support the prescribing of symptomatic treatments for coughs and colds.
- The Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and Commission on Human Medicines (CHM) advise that OTC and GSL cough and cold preparations containing the ingredients below **should not be used** in children 6 years and under, because there is **no robust evidence that they work** and as there have been reports of harm, the risks outweigh the benefits.<sup>2</sup> These ingredients\*\* are:
  - Dextromethorphan and pholcodine (**antitussives**).
  - Guaifenesin and ipecacuanha (**expectorants**).
  - Ephedrine, oxymetazoline, phenylephrine, pseudoephedrine, and xylometazoline (**topical and oral decongestants**).
  - Brompheniramine, chlorphenamine, diphenhydramine, doxylamine, promethazine, and triprolidine (**antihistamines**).
- The MHRA and CHM also advise that the use of OTC antitussives containing codeine be **avoided** in children 12 years and under and in children of any age known to be CYP2D6 ultra-rapid metabolisers.<sup>4</sup> Codeine is not recommended for adolescents (12 to 18 years) who have problems with breathing.<sup>4</sup>
- The CHM and the Paediatric Medicines Expert Advisory Group advise that OTC oral liquid medicines containing codeine should no longer be used to treat cough in children and young people under 18 years of age.<sup>5</sup>
- Advise on safe and effective self-care measures. You may wish to provide a 'non-prescription' sheet or a patient information leaflet to promote education about self-limiting conditions. These resources are available at this [link](#). An additional resource is available in the [Birth to Five booklet](#) by HSC Public Health.
- If the patient wishes to use OTC or GSL preparations, sign-post to community pharmacies for further advice, where appropriate.

## Guidance for patients, carers and guardians

- Most coughs and colds tend to improve over time and treatment is not usually required. An acute cough is a natural response to keep the airways clear whilst the body fights infection. Colds usually last 7 to 10 days and coughs up to 3 weeks.
- There is insufficient high quality evidence to support the prescribing of symptomatic treatments for coughs and colds.
- Cough and cold preparations containing certain ingredients above\*\* **should not be used** in children 6 years and under, because there is **no robust evidence that they work**. There have been some reports of harm, the risks outweigh the benefits. Your pharmacist will be able to advise you on the safest products.
- For children 1 year and older, a warm drink of honey and lemon is recommended to help soothe an irritating cough and dry throat.<sup>6</sup> Honey should be avoided in children under 12 months due to increased risk of botulism.
- By keeping a selection of essential medications at home you can treat the symptoms of a cough and/or cold in a timely manner.
- Community pharmacists can offer advice on how to manage the symptoms of a cough or cold, when to seek medical advice, and what to take if you are on other medication. You do not need to make an appointment to see the pharmacist, and many pharmacies are open late nights and at the weekend when the doctor's surgery is closed.
- For advice on coughs and colds see <http://www.rcgp.org.uk/clinical-and-research/toolkits/target-antibiotics-toolkit/patient-information-leaflets.aspx>
- For advice for parents an additional resource is available in the which can be found at <http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/birth-five>

**The NHS belongs to YOU, use it responsibly**

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