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NHS facing winter pressures as millions of Brits visit their GP or A&E as first port of call for winter sniffles

New health campaign *Treat Yourself Better with Pharmacist Advice* aims to ease pressure on already struggling NHS services and reduce unnecessary antibiotic prescriptions

- Unnecessary GP and A&E visits for winter ailments could cost the NHS over £343 million
- Nearly half who visit the GP for common winter ailments do so because they want antibiotics
- Younger generation are the biggest culprits for wasting GP time
- Only one in five make use of their local pharmacy despite long GP waiting times

New research reveals an alarming 6 million UK adults would visit their GP and over 2 million would visit A&E as a first port of call for common winter ailments* such as colds and flu¹. With each GP consultation costing the NHS £43 and an A&E walk-in-service costing £41, this could equate to a staggering cost of over £343 million which could be better spent on people who need medical attention².

Flu is the biggest cause of concern resulting in one in four (24%) visiting their GP or A&E followed by nasal congestion (20%), a sore throat (13%), cough (13%) or cold (11%) putting increased pressure on already struggling NHS services¹. Surprisingly, the younger generation is the biggest culprit with nearly one in four (22%) of 18-34 year olds admitting they have visited a GP as a first port of call for winter ailments versus only one in 10 (12%) of those aged over 35¹.

Antibiotic demands

The research, carried out to support the *Treat Yourself Better with Pharmacist Advice* campaign, finds that one of the most common reasons people (44%) visit the GP when suffering with a winter ailment is because they want or think they need antibiotics¹. However, antibiotics don't have any impact on common winter ailments which are caused by viruses as they only work against bacteria. Also concerning is that only half of adults (55%) believe their GP adequately explains why antibiotics don't work for common winter ailments¹. Despite government efforts to reduce prescriptions for antibiotics, recent research published in the *Journal of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy* showed a 40% rise in antibiotic prescriptions by GPs for colds and flu (from 1999-2011)³. Additionally, research from the Longitude Prize survey found nearly half of GPs admit to prescribing 'useless' antibiotics just to get pushy patients to leave their surgeries.⁴

*Winter ailments include cough, cold, flu, sore throat and nasal congestion.

¹ Research carried out on behalf of the Treat Yourself Better with Pharmacist Advice campaign by Redshift Research. Sample size: 2,000 UK adults, July 2014.

² Curtis L. Personal and Social Services Research Unit, Canterbury University. Unit costs of health and social care 2012. Available at: <http://www.pssru.ac.uk/project-pages/unit-costs/2012/>. Accessed August, 2014.

³ Hawker J. et al. Trends in antibiotic prescribing in primary care for clinical syndromes subject to national recommendations to reduce antibiotic resistance, UK 1995–2011: analysis of a large database of primary care consultations *Journal of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy*. August 2014. <http://jac.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/08/01/jac.dku291.short?rss=1>

⁴ Research carried out by The Longitudinal Prize 2014 on behalf of Nesta. Sample size: 1,000 doctors, July 2014. <http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/longitude-paper-antibiotics-open-review.pdf>



John Watson, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Department of Health comments: “Antibiotic overuse results in reduced efficacy, so it is critical that we all stop using them when we don’t need them so that they work when we do.”

Pharmacies are underused

Only one in five (21%) adults make use of their local pharmacy for winter ailments which should be a first port of call for expert advice¹. This week sees the launch of a new winter health campaign *Treat Yourself Better with Pharmacist Advice*, backed by the Department of Health (DH) and Public Health England (PHE), which encourages people to treat winter ailments themselves and to seek advice from their pharmacist before going directly to their GP.

Keith Ridge, Chief Pharmaceutical Officer for NHS England comments: “Pharmacists can help people better manage winter ailments by providing effective medicines as well as guidance on self-care and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. They will advise people when it is necessary to visit the GP and what warning signs to look out for which may require medical attention, however in most cases this won’t be necessary, so I would urge people to speak to their local pharmacist before rushing to A&E or making a GP appointment .”

Symptom duration confusion

The research also highlighted that people underestimate the normal duration of winter ailments and therefore visit their GP too early¹. 9 in 10 (98%) expect a cough to last on average for only 8 days when in fact it can last up to three weeks and 8 in 10 (80%) expect flu symptoms to last only 10 days when 2 weeks is the normal duration¹.

Waiting times

People wait on average less than 5 minutes to speak to a local pharmacist about winter ailments, compared with a 3 ½ day wait just to get a GP appointment and one in five (19%) waiting at least seven days¹. The *Treat Yourself Better with Pharmacist Advice* campaign hopes people will think twice before making a GP appointment unless they display “warning signs**” or are advised to do so by their pharmacist, as this will free up appointments for people who really need them. Pharmacies provide a trusted source of health and wellbeing advice for all common winter ailments and are widely available. 96% of the population, even those living in the most deprived areas, can get to a pharmacy within 20 minutes by walking or using public transport.

For further information on self-treating winter ailments, how long you can expect symptoms to last and warning signs to look out for, visit www.treatyourselfbetter.co.uk.

Media contact:

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**Warning signs indicate that symptoms may require medical attention.