

South East Regional Medicines Optimisation Group (SERMOG) policy recommendation

Title:	Over the counter (OTC) prescribing guidance
Number:	SERMOG-07
Category:	Eligibility criteria apply
Date determined by SERMOG:	March 2025

Policy recommendation:	
<p>The South East Regional Medicines Optimisation Group (SERMOG) considered national and professional society guidance, the baseline position, other integrated care board (ICB) policies, the views of SE region clinical specialists, equality and equity issues and the potential impact of implementing a region wide OTC prescribing policy.</p> <p>All decisions were made with reference to the South East Region Policy Recommendation Committees’ Ethical Framework. Taking these into account, the SERMOG recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prescribing of OTC items is not routinely funded, unless one or more of the relevant exceptions listed in the table below apply. • The table below details self-limiting, short-term illnesses and minor conditions that are included in NHS England guidance and should therefore not be issued with a prescription (unless they fall under certain exceptions). • The recommendations do not override the individual responsibility of healthcare professionals to support their patients in agreeing the most appropriate treatment options for them, through taking a shared decision-making approach. • The list below is not exhaustive and requires prescribers to use their professional and clinical judgement as to whether prescribing is necessary. 	
Items with limited evidence of clinical effectiveness	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probiotics • Vitamins and minerals* 	<p>* Vitamins and minerals should not be prescribed except:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When the patient has a medically diagnosed deficiency, including for those patients who may have a lifelong or chronic condition, or have undergone surgery that results in malabsorption. Continuing need should however be reviewed on a regular basis.

	<p>Maintenance or preventative treatment is not an exception.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calcium and vitamin D for osteoporosis. • Prescription only vitamin D analogues such as alfacalcidol. • Malnutrition including from alcoholism (see NICE guidance) • Patients suitable to receive Healthy Start vitamins, which are available to pregnant and breastfeeding people, people with a child under 1 year old, and children under the age of 4 (note: this is not on prescription but commissioned separately).
Self-limiting conditions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acute sore throat • Cold sores of the lip (infrequent)* • Conjunctivitis • Constipation (infrequent) • Coughs, colds and nasal congestion • Cradle cap** • Cystitis (mild) • Haemorrhoids • Infant colic 	<p>OTC items should not be prescribed for self-limiting conditions unless the patient has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symptoms that suggest the condition is not minor. • ‘Red flag’ symptoms (for example, indigestion with very bad pain). <p>* Exemption for cold sores – this recommendation does not apply to immunocompromised patients.</p> <p>** Exemption for cradle cap – this recommendation does not apply if the condition is not improving and is causing infant distress.</p>
Minor conditions suitable for self-care	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acne (mild) • Burns and scalds (minor) • Dandruff • Dermatitis (mild irritant) • Diarrhoea* • Dry eyes or sore tired eyes • Dry skin (mild) • Earwax • Excessive sweating 	<p>OTC items should not be prescribed for minor conditions suitable for self-care unless for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing a long-term condition (for example, regular pain relief for chronic arthritis or treatments for IBD). • Treating more complex forms of minor illnesses (for example, severe migraines that are unresponsive to OTC medicines).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hay fever and seasonal rhinitis (mild to moderate) • Head lice • Indigestion and heartburn • Insect bites and stings • Migraine (infrequent) • Minor conditions associated with pain, discomfort and fever • Mouth ulcers • Nappy rash • Oral thrush • Prevention of dental caries • Ringworm or athlete's foot ** • Sunburn (due to excessive sun exposure) • Sun protection *** • Teething and toothache (mild) • Threadworms • Travel sickness • Warts and verrucae 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing presentations of symptoms that suggest the condition is not minor. • 'Red flag' symptoms (for example, indigestion with very bad pain). • Patients with complex conditions (for example, immunosuppressed patients). • Treating an adverse effect or symptom of a more complex illness. • Treating a minor condition suitable for self-care that has not responded sufficiently to an OTC item. • Circumstances where the prescriber's clinical judgement is that these are exceptional and warrant deviation from the recommendation to use self-care. • Individual patients where the prescriber considers that the patient's ability to self-care is compromised because of medical, mental health or significant social vulnerability to the extent that their health and/or wellbeing could be adversely affected if reliant on self-care. • Circumstances where the product licence does not allow the item to be sold OTC to certain groups of patients. These may vary by medicine, but could include babies, children and/or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Community pharmacists will be aware of what these are and can advise accordingly. <p>* Exemption for diarrhoea – the recommendation to not prescribe does not apply to children.</p> <p>** Exemption for ringworm or athlete's foot – the recommendation to not prescribe does not apply in cases of lymphoedema or history of lower limb cellulitis.</p> <p>*** Exemption for sun protection – the recommendation to not prescribe does not apply in cases of Advisory Committee on Borderline Substances approved indication of photo dermatoses, where skin protection should be prescribed.</p>
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Version control:
Version 1.0 – circulated to ICBs for ratification on 09/04/2025
Notes:
<p>This policy recommendation will be reviewed when new information becomes available that is likely to have a material effect on the current recommendation.</p> <p>South East region ICBs will always consider appropriate individual funding requests (IFRs) through their IFR processes.</p>