

Ailments in Community Pharmacy: Red Flag Symptom Summary

Ailment	Definition	Grace Period	Red Flag Symptoms (when to refer to urgent care services)	
Fever in children	When an infant/child has a body temperature of 38°C or higher.	Fever in children is self-limiting in most cases and the temperature should go down after three or four days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covid –19 Symptom – refer to NHS guidance Neck stiffness A rash that does not fade on pressure (glass test) The child is bothered by light Breathing difficulty – for example, stomach sucking in under ribs Pale, blotchy, blue/grey skin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Response – child does not respond normally and is difficult to wake Unusually cold hands and feet Fit/seizure – child has a fit for the first time (cannot stop shaking) Child’s crying is weak/high-pitched and does not sound like their normal cry Bulging fontanelle – soft spot on child’s head curves outwards
Lower back pain	Lower back pain (lumbago) is characterised by pain between the bottom of the ribs and the top of the hips, although sometimes the pain can be felt at any point along the spine.	Lower back pain usually gets better within a few weeks or months.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Numbness or tingling around genitals or buttocks Difficulty passing urine Loss of bladder or bowel control Chest pain High temperature of 38°C or above Unexplained weight loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Swelling/deformity in the back No improvement after resting or within a few weeks Symptoms worse at night Pain began after a serious accident and/or injury New back pain in patients over 50 years old
Common cold	Mild viral infection of the nose, throat and upper airways	Most cases of common cold will usually clear up on their own within one or two weeks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Symptoms get worse after 3-5 days Symptoms do not improve after three weeks Temperature is very high/feel hot and shivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty breathing or chest pain develops Patients with long-term medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes, or a heart, lung, kidney or neurological disease
Cough	Reflex response to an irritation in the airways. It may present as dry, or productive (production of phlegm)	Most cases of cough will usually clear up on their own within three to four weeks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covid –19 Symptom – refer to NHS guidance Lasting longer than three weeks Coughing up blood Pain – in the chest and/or shoulder Breathing problems Rapidly worsening cough 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling drowsy Unexplained weight loss New swelling/lumps around the neck Voice change – hoarseness Medicines – some can cause cough
Diarrhoea and vomiting	Commonly caused by stomach bug (gastroenteritis), vomiting bug (norovirus) or food poisoning.	Should resolve within a few days. In adults and children diarrhoea should stop within 5 to 7 days and vomiting 1 or 2 days.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being worried about a baby who is under 12 months Child stops feeding (breast or bottle) Child under the age of 5 years with signs of dehydration (feeling thirsty, dark yellow urine, tired, reduced urine output, dry mouth, lips and eyes) Blood in the diarrhoea or bleeding from the bottom Diarrhoea for more than 7 days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vomiting blood or vomit that looks like ground coffee Vomiting bright green or yellow May have swallowed something poisonous Stiff neck and pain when looking at bright lights Sudden, severe headache Severe weight loss
Ear infection	Inflammation of the ear. Typically middle ear infection (otitis media) or outer ear infection (otitis externa).	Most ear infections improve within 3 days, but some can last up to 7 days.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very high temperature Feeling hot or shivering Swelling around the ear Fluid leaking from the ear Hearing loss or change in hearing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Severe sore throat Dizziness Recurrent ear infections Medical condition such as diabetes or a heart, lung, kidney or neurological disease
Meningitis	Inflammation of the membranes that surround and protect the brain and spinal cord.	It can be considered a medical emergency and if left untreated, can be very dangerous.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fever (in addition to below) Cold hands and feet Vomiting Seizures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rash or blotchy, mottled and pale skin Rapid breathing Babies with high-pitched cry, body is stiff, floppy or unresponsive, bulging fontanelle – soft spot on top of child’s head visibly curves outwards Joint and muscle pain

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Eczema	Skin inflammation where skin can become cracked, dry, itchy, red and sore. Atopic eczema occurs all over the body, including hands, inside the elbows knees, scalp and fa	A long-term skin condition. Often present in people who have allergies, asthma and hay fever.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs of infection (crusting, weeping, and/or presence of small bumps on the skin that contain fluid/pus with fever) • Symptoms reduce quality of life (affect sleep or impair social activities) • Adverse reaction to emollients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children under two years old who present with fever, malaise and swelling of the lymph nodes • Painful blistering rash and/or bleeding areas that extend over the entire body that indicate severe infection • Facial eczema that has not responded to treatment
Headache	Pain present in the head region. May include migraine, tension-type headache or cluster headache	Most headaches do not have a serious cause and will get better on their own.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent headaches • Headache gets worse and painkillers do not help • Feeling sick or vomiting • Numbness/weakness in the arms or legs • Very high temperature • Severe headache with jaw pain whilst eating, blurred/double vision, sore scalp 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sudden onset with extreme pain within 5 minutes • Serious injury to head • Loss of vision • The white part of the eye is red • Drowsiness and/or confusion
Heartburn	Burning feeling in the middle of the chest and/or a sour, unpleasant taste in the mouth caused by stomach acid.	Estimated to affect approximately 40% of the population and can be present, for four or more weeks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symptoms present most days for 3 weeks or longer • Lifestyle changes do not help improve symptoms • Pharmacy medicines do not help improve symptoms • Other symptoms such as difficulty swallowing, frequent vomiting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unexplained weight loss • Vomiting blood • Dark stools • Chest pain
Sore throat	Acute respiratory tract infection, may be bacterial or viral, affects the throat. Symptoms include pain and tenderness at the back of the throat, bad breath and swollen glands.	Self-limiting condition and usually resolves within one to two weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sore throat that has not improved after a week • Frequent sore throat • The patient is concerned about their sore throat • Patient has a very high temperature and/or feels hot and shivery • Breathing/swallowing difficulty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symptoms of severe dehydration – such as dizziness, confusion, nausea • Drooling • Stridor – a high-pitched sound that can be heard during breathing • Patient has a weak-immune system through taking medicine • Severe symptoms which are rapidly worsening
Stroke	Medical emergency and requires immediate medical treatment. It occurs suddenly when there is blood supply disruption to part of the brain.	Teams should be aware of clinical features, and “red flag” symptoms to provide immediate early diagnosis, referral and rapid treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call 999 IMMEDIATELY when they present with any of the following symptoms • Face- has the face dropped on one side? • Arms - can the patient raise both arms and keep them raised? • Speech- is speech slurred/garbled? Can they speak clearly? • Time- If any of these three signs are seen, call 999 immediately 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paralysis on one side of the body • Loss or blurred vision • Dizziness • Difficulty swallowing • Difficulty understanding what is being said • Sudden and very severe headache
Urinary tract infection	Usually caused by bacteria from the gastrointestinal tract. A lower urinary tract infection (UTI) (also known as cystitis) is an infection of the bladder and an upper UTI is an infection of the ureters and/or kidney.	Most UTIs can be easily treated with antibiotics and symptoms start to improve within 5 days.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male patients • Pregnant women • Children • Elderly • First time experiencing any symptoms • Blood in urine • Symptoms do not improve within a few days • Symptoms return after treatment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain in the sides or lower back • Temperature is above 38°C or less than 36°C • Feeling hot and shivering • Nausea • Vomiting • Diarrhoea

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References and further reading:

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