

## Why trusting your pharmacist could put your health at risk

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We're urged to see our chemist about 'minor' ills but how safe is their advice? We went undercover to the major pharmacy chains with three seemingly simple questions... with disturbing results.

Worried about your health? Then why not pop into your local pharmacy? That's what the Government would like you to do, it seems; it's introducing a number of initiatives to give pharmacists more of the responsibilities of GPs.

For instance, pharmacies are able to sell an increasing range of drugs previously available only on prescription.



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**Undercover investigation: The Daily Mail found that a number of major pharmacy chains failed to give safe advice for three seemingly simple questions**

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Meanwhile, a new network of so-called 'super chemists' is to be set up with the aim of dealing with half of all minor illnesses within three years.

Doctors' leaders have expressed reservations about the proposals.

Professor Steve Field, chairman of the Royal Society of General Practitioners and a practising GP, says: 'I support pharmacists giving advice on minor illness over the counter, as long as it is within the scope of what they are trained for. But pharmacists are not doctors.'

So how accurate, or safe, is the advice you'll receive? As this Good Health investigation discovered, the guidance being given by some pharmacies is often inadequate, and sometimes potentially dangerous.

We visited a number of pharmacies - including several supermarket chemists - to test their response to three 'red flag' problems.

The problems we identified were: persistent diarrhoea, using two paracetamol products at the same time, and putting steroid cream on the face.

Ivor Deitsch, a Fellow of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society with more than 40 years' experience as a pharmacist, then told us what should have happened on each of our visits.

But as you can see, in a shocking 70 per cent of cases, they failed our tests.

The problem is often that some patients do not get to see the pharmacist, but rather a young 'medical counter assistant', usually with little life experience and whose only relevant qualification is a correspondence course in which the 'exam' is a multiple choice test taken over the phone.

As Michael Summers, vice chairman of the Patients' Association, explains: 'Pharmacists are usually very clued up. But there are occasions when medicines are given out by assistants who do not have the same qualifications.'

Professor Field adds: 'When a patient goes to a pharmacy, they need to talk to a pharmacist who's trained rather than an assistant who isn't. And that pharmacist needs to make sure they're giving impartial advice and not trying to sell medication.'

So what did we find?

## My wife has had diarrhoea for a week

Anyone complaining of diarrhoea that has lasted a week should immediately ring alarm bells, says Ivor Deitsch. Milder cases of food poisoning usually clear in a few days.

'If the patient is showing no signs of getting better after that, they could be seriously ill, particularly if they've been abroad,' he says.

'These could be the symptoms of a serious infection - even of malaria. Anyone suffering like this for a week should be told to make an immediate GP appointment.'

The most important question the pharmacist should ask is the simplest: how long has the patient been unwell.

So what happened when I turned up saying my wife was feeling weak, sick and dizzy, with a fever and diarrhoea?



**Failed: A number of pharmacies prescribed Imodium as a cure for diarrhoea without asking for how long the patient had been sick**

### **Lloyds Pharmacy**

After I list my wife's symptoms the assistant asks whether the diarrhoea is 'really bad' [yes], and goes to the shelves.

'We'll need to give her Imodium Plus, which is much stronger than the normal stuff. But that won't deal with her temperature. How bad is it? Maybe some paracetamol?'

I say her temperature seems high. 'I think Nurofen will be best, then.' She checks with the pharmacist who does not think Nurofen is a good idea for someone with a delicate tummy.

Finally, the pharmacist walks over, but not to ask questions, merely to add more pills. 'Tell her to take these Motilium. They will settle her tummy.'

**Verdict: FAILED**

### **Boots**

The woman behind the counter is keen not to rush things. 'Is she on any medication?'

Well, she's been taking Imodium and it hasn't helped. 'Well, you could try Pepto-Bismol instead.'

Then she has second thoughts. 'But there's no reason why it should work if Imodium hasn't. How long has she had the diarrhoea?'

A week, I say. 'That's too long for food poisoning. She should go to the GP. And make sure she keeps hydrated. Have you been on holiday recently?'

Yes, to Kenya. 'Well she should definitely go to the GP as soon as possible.'

**Verdict: PASSED**

### **Sainsbury's**

'How long has your wife been unwell?' The pharmacist's eyebrows rise the moment I tell him.

'You need to take her to the doctor's and replace all the fluids she is losing,' he says, adding I should give her Dioralyte rehydration fluid as soon as I get home.

**Verdict: PASSED**

### **Tesco**

'Has she been eating?' Not much, I say. 'For how long has she had the diarrhoea and a temperature?' A week. Again, the tone of her conversation changes.

What was a friendly chat becomes almost an order. 'She definitely needs to see her GP. She can't just take Imodium.'

**Verdict: PASSED**

### **Independent Chemist**

At this small shop, in a run-down area of North London, the first question is a surprising one. 'Is she pregnant? No. Has she been eating? Has she been sick?'

At no point does he ask how long she has been ill, or if we've been away.

'It's probably food poisoning. You need something to stop the diarrhoea. Tell her just to drink liquids. She should get better soon.' I'm sold Imodium.

**Verdict: FAILED**

### **I need something for a cold AND a headache**

Many people don't realise how easy it is to accidentally overdose on paracetamol through 'combination' products; the drug is found in cold and flu remedies, for instance, and if you also take a paracetamol for a headache, you are getting a double hit. The risk is liver damage. 'Overdosing from paracetamol can be very serious,' says Ivor Deitsch.

'At the extreme, it can be fatal. There are warnings on the packet, but many patients don't bother reading them.'

I'm going to tell the pharmacist my wife has a cold and a fierce headache. I want to buy some cold relief tablets that contain paracetamol and also a packet of paracetamol pills.

'Though it is perfectly OK for the pharmacist to sell these products to you at the same time, they must tell you not to take them together,' says Ivor Deitsch.

He points out that nowadays you can even buy cold cures and paracetamol at petrol stations. But in a pharmacy will anyone warn me of the dangers?



**Double danger: Many people don't realise that you can overdose on paracetamol - the drug is in cold and flu remedies and you also take paracetamol for headaches**

### **Lloyds Pharmacy**

The small print on the back of the cold cure reveals, as it must, that its main ingredient is paracetamol.

I pick up some paracetamol caplets as well, and take both packets to the counter. The only question I am asked? 'Would you like a bag?'

**Verdict: FAILED**

### **Boots**

The front of the Beechams tablets says: 'Contains paracetamol and decongestant'.

As in all our scenarios I pay at the till by the pharmacist's counter and also take along a packet of 16 paracetamol. The question is the same: 'Would you like a bag?'

I later find my till receipt. At the bottom, in capital letters, is a warning. 'You have purchased paracetamol products. Please ensure you do not take with any other products containing- paracetamol. Always read the label.'

Is a message on a receipt a substitute for face-to-face advice?

**Verdict: FAILED**

### **Sainsbury's**

The cold cure I select from the shelves is Sainsbury's own-brand 'max strength cold & flu, day & night capsules'.

I wander over to the pharmacy counter. 'I can't find the paracetamol,' I say. The assistant points to the end of the shelf.

When I pay for the two packets at the pharmacist's counter, the assistant doesn't comment.

**Verdict: FAILED**

### **Tesco**

I do a bit of grocery shopping before picking up the cold and flu capsules and the paracetamol from the shelves. I take them to the adjacent pharmacy counter.

'You can pay for them at the main checkout, you know,' says the assistant. So I do.

Unsurprisingly, the checkout girl is not in the business of doling out medical advice.

**Verdict: FAILED**

### ***Independent pharmacy***

I purchase the Lemsip and the paracetamol from a small family-owned shop in a middle-class suburb. Again - no word of warning.

**Verdict: FAILED**

### ***My wife needs steroid cream for an insect bite***

Pharmacists are told specifically not to sell hydrocortisone cream for use on the face unless it has been prescribed by a doctor, says Ivor Deitsch.

'You can use it on the face only in exceptional circumstances, because the drug thins the skin, especially in women, and can cause scarring.'

I decide to ask for some for my wife to treat a insect bite on her face (hydrocortisone reduces inflammation). Hopefully, he'll ask where the bite is.

### ***Lloyds Pharmacy***

When I ask for the cream, the assistant retrieves it from behind a perspex cover - the product is not allowed to be sold on the open shelves.

I tell her my wife's story but do not mention where the bite is. And she does not ask me, but warns (correctly): 'Don't use on broken skin.'

**Verdict: FAILED**

### ***Boots***

I'm asked: 'Have you used it before?' I say that the cream is not for me, it's for my wife.

'Tell her not to use it for longer than seven days. If she's still got a problem, she should see her GP.' I'm not asked where my wife will be using it.

**Verdict: FAILED**

### ***Sainsbury's***

The assistant asks some questions - but my answers don't seem to make any difference.

'Is it for you?' [No, my wife.] 'Has she used it before?' [I don't know.] 'What will she be using it for?' [A bite.]

Without finding out that my wife wants to rub it on her face, she sells me a tube.

**Verdict: FAILED**

### **Tesco**

The assistant gets the tube from behind the counter. When she finds out it is not for me, she wants to know if my wife is taking any other medication, and, crucially, where she's been bitten.

'If it's her face, I'm afraid we can't sell it to her. She'll have to see her doctor.'

**Verdict: PASSED**

### **Independent pharmacy**

'Is your wife around? I'd like to see her,' says the pharmacist.

'If the wound is infected, she will need antibiotics.'

It sounds like he's being very thorough. He asks where the bite is. I tell him it's on my wife's face.

Shockingly, he replies: 'The box says don't use it on the face.'

But don't worry. Doctors can prescribe it for the face, so it's fine. Just don't use it for longer than week.'

**Verdict: FAILED**

## **WHAT DO THE PHARMACISTS SAY?**

We took the results of our investigation to the pharmacy chains.

A spokesman from Lloyds Pharmacy said: 'We are very disappointed by these results.'

'Clearly the Daily Mail has identified cases when we fall short of our own and our customers' expectations.'

Sainsbury's also said it was 'disappointed that we did not meet our high standard of service on this occasion'.

Boots has promised to investigate.

Tesco, which performed the best of all the chains and supermarkets apart from the paracetamol test, said: 'We apologise that on this particular occasion it appears that the correct advice may not have been given.'

For Michael Summers of the Patients' Association the answer is simple: chemist's shops need to make sure pharmacists are properly identified - either by the use of a name badge or a uniform.

'Although stories such as these can be helpful in identifying areas that might require changes, it is important they are kept in context,' says David Pruce, Director of Policy at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain.

'There are more than 13,000 pharmacy premises in Great Britain.'

'Most offer a high quality of service and advice.'

He added: 'Patient safety is paramount and the RPSGB will therefore investigate these findings in more detail.'

Find this story at [www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-1077346/Why-trusting-pharmacist-health-risk.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-1077346/Why-trusting-pharmacist-health-risk.html)

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