How to use this guide

This guide covers the most common symptoms which people call NHS Direct about for advice. It does not claim to cover all health problems but it is a handy reference for the most common symptoms that could affect you or your family. If this guide does not cover your particular symptom, call NHS Direct for advice.

- Use the body key (page 3) to help you find what symptoms you might have. The index (pages 132 to 136) may also help you.
- Turn to the section of the guide which covers those symptoms.
- Answer the series of questions about your symptoms and follow the advice given.
- If the guide directs you somewhere else within the guide, turn to that page and work through the questions in the same way.

The glossary of conditions (pages 92 to 115) will give you general advice about particular conditions:

Your answers will give you three courses of action.

- **Self-care** – it’s safe to manage this problem yourself.
- **Call NHS Direct** – the NHS Direct nurse will be able to advise you on whether you need medical attention and, if you do, how quickly you should get help.
- **Dial 999** – you need emergency help now.

If the guide suggests dealing with the problem yourself, it will give you advice on:

- what to do;
- what medicines, if any, you can buy from your pharmacist or chemist which could help; and
- other people or organisations who may be able to offer more advice.

It is not always that easy to decide whether you have an emergency on your hands or not, which is why you may find calling NHS Direct helpful. For more advice on ‘What is an emergency?’, see pages 128 and 129.

**NHS Direct Online**

You can also find the NHS Direct self-help guide on the Internet at www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk. NHS Direct Online also includes:

- information on conditions and treatments;
- advice on healthy living;
- an A-Z guide to NHS services; and
- advice on health stories in the news.
Use this **body key** to find your starting point. What part of the body has the problem? The colour will then direct you to the section of the guide where you will find advice.

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Is it a symptom or a condition?

'I have another dose of the flu.' How many times have you heard someone say this when they are actually suffering from a cold or are just feeling run-down? The names of some conditions tend to be used to describe how we feel rather than what we are suffering from.

**Symptom:** A symptom is the personal effect a condition has on us. Feeling sick – nausea – is one of the symptoms of food poisoning, but it can also be a result of dehydration, travelling, ear infections, headaches – the list is almost endless.

**Condition:** A condition is a collection of symptoms and describes what we are suffering from, such as flu, gastroenteritis and so on.

Pain is another good example of a symptom. No-one else can know how much pain you are suffering, and the way you suffer from pain is quite different from how other people experience it. Obviously pain can arise from a large number of conditions and injuries. ‘Colic’ is the description of one type of pain in the abdomen. It is not a condition itself and is the result of things like bowel irritation. Treating symptoms rather than the root cause of the problem – the condition – is common practice, not least because the condition is often long-standing or the precise cause of the symptom is not known. The truth of the matter is that, while we may not be able to cure all the conditions that affect us, we can provide treatments to make life more comfortable and pleasant. Rheumatoid arthritis is an example of this. Knowing the reason why we are suffering from certain symptoms, and telling the difference between a serious and a minor condition that is causing them, is important, and this guide will help you. If you are still not sure after using it, ring **NHS Direct** for advice.
How do I know if my baby is ill?

Parents are usually good at noticing when something is wrong with their baby. But it may be difficult to know what is wrong.

Here are some signs that can be important.

1 If your baby is not responding to you normally
   - When awake, your baby may seem unusually drowsy or not interested in looking at you.
   - Your baby may not be interested in feeding.
   - Perhaps when cuddled, your baby feels floppy or limp.
   - Your baby’s cry seems different (perhaps moaning, whimpering or shrill), and soothing doesn’t help.

If you think you notice these in your baby, please call NHS Direct and talk to a nurse.

2 Other signs of illness
   If you are already worried and then notice other problems too (like those in the list below), call NHS Direct for advice.
   - If your baby looks very pale.
   - If your baby seems irritable and does not like being touched.
   - If a new rash starts to appear.
   - If your baby’s skin looks bruised or discoloured.
   - If your baby seems hot (feverish or has a temperature).
   - If your baby seems breathless or is breathing much faster than usual.
   - If your baby starts being sick (vomiting).

Remember, you know your baby better than anyone else!
If you are worried, call NHS Direct for advice.

When taking a young child to hospital
   If you and your child need to go to hospital:
   - reassure your child and explain that you're going together to see the doctor at the hospital to make things better;
   - take a favourite toy with you;
   - dress your child in a coat or a dressing gown over their nightclothes, or dress your child fully (it doesn't matter which . . . do what seems most sensible);
   - arrange care for other children or, if this is not possible, take them as well (it is not wise to leave a child at home without an adult there to look after them); and
   - don’t forget to leave a note, and take your keys, handbag or wallet with you.
Breast changes

Can you feel or see lumps, thickening, dimpling, puckering or depressions in the skin or changes in the general shape of the breast?

No

Yes

Call NHS Direct

Most changes that take place in the breast are due to hormonal changes or ageing. Even so, these changes should be checked by a doctor or nurse.

See Breast cancer on page 92 for more information.

Do you experience pain or constant tenderness in your breast with each period?

No

Yes

Call NHS Direct

Hormonal changes can produce tenderness for some women. If this has been happening for years, it is unlikely to be serious so wait until your period has finished and see if the tenderness or lumpiness is still there. If it is or if there is a sudden onset of pain with your periods, it should be checked by a doctor or nurse.

See Breast cancer on page 92 for more information.

Do you normally have lumps in your breasts that have been checked and found to be safe, but now find that a new lump has appeared?

No

Yes

Call NHS Direct

Some women are prone to lumps in their breasts, but these can lead to a false sense of security. Each new lump should be examined by a doctor or nurse.

See Breast cancer on page 92 for more information.

See the opposite page

NHS Direct

CALL 24 HOURS ON
0845 4647
Is there any fluid when you squeeze the nipple or are you experiencing discharge that is not breast milk?

Yes

Call NHS Direct
Some breast infections may cause these symptoms, but cancer can also do the same thing. It must be checked by a doctor or nurse.
See Breast cancer on page 92 for more information.

No

Do you have a strong family history of breast cancer – for example, has your mother or sister suffered from it?

Yes

Call NHS Direct
There is an increased risk of breast cancer if members of your family have suffered from it. You should discuss this with your doctor, who may recommend more regular medical examinations.
See Breast cancer on page 92 for more information.

No

Are you pregnant or have you just given birth?

Yes

Call NHS Direct
Major changes take place inside the breast during pregnancy and these changes will take place for quite a while even if you are not breast-feeding.

No

Self-care advice
- Often, tenderness and lumps in the breasts are related to your menstrual cycle (periods).
- Learn to examine your own breasts to find out what is normal for you.
- Keep a diary for a couple of months to see if the problem happens at the same time each month.
- If tenderness is causing discomfort, a simple painkiller, such as paracetamol, may help.
- Make sure the bra you are wearing fits properly.
- If the condition gets worse or new symptoms develop, call NHS Direct.
- If you are still worried or need more help, call NHS Direct.

Before ringing NHS Direct or 999, it would be helpful if you think about the following and are ready to answer any questions if you are asked.
- Your or the age of the person you are calling about.
- Whether you or they are pregnant or have just given birth.
- Any medicines you or they are taking at the moment.
- Any serious illness you or they have had before.
- Whether any members of your or their family have suffered from breast cancer.