

HALEON

The value of self-care

Our Haleon position



Self-care as a vital component of healthcare

Global healthcare systems are facing an incredible challenge. Changes in demographics - particularly an ageing population - are increasing the demand for healthcare services and putting additional pressure on care delivery. Greater incidents of chronic ailments, co-morbidities, and the rising cost of healthcare put additional pressure on healthcare budgets. As such, healthcare systems need to transform.

Self-care, defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as “the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider”, can play an important role in enabling this transformation.ⁱ A greater emphasis on self-care can empower individuals to manage their health and take preventative actions, while easing the burden on overstretched health systems, reducing costs, increasing the effectiveness of care, and freeing up time and resources for healthcare professionals by reducing the need to see and treat patients for conditions suitable for self-treatment.

In recent years, the COVID-19 outbreak has accentuated the value of self-care and its important role in the healthcare continuum. With healthcare systems under unprecedented pressure, people-centred healthcare and patient empowerment present opportunities for individuals to take an active role in their own health, and create more resilient populations. In the western world, further driven by a growing interest in personal well-being, easier access to information, and advances in digital technologies, individuals are becoming increasingly eager to participate in self-care.

The value of self-care

Self-care interventions are tools which can include evidence-based, quality drugs, services, diagnostics, and/or digital products, which can be provided fully or partially outside of traditional health services.ⁱⁱ Self-care interventions can benefit individuals, health systems and communities by:

Supporting individual wellbeing and empowering individuals to become better managers of their own health

The Global Self-Care Federation (GSCF) has conducted a global study in partnership with the Fresenius University of Applied Sciences Wiesbaden on the economic and social value of self-care. For individuals, the study identified benefits including

increased affordability of healthcare, time savings, and increased productivity and welfare.ⁱⁱⁱ In practice this can mean:

- practical benefits such as time and cost savings, access to non-prescription medicines and other consumer health products, effective digital health tools, and health education and information;
- a decrease in healthcare-related costs, including for transport, information-seeking, direct costs of products and services, lost income, and productivity due to time spent seeking care;
- improved quality of life and health outcomes through symptom alleviation, prevention and maintaining good health;^{iv} and
- Individuals are empowered to better manage their own health, which has a positive relationship with most health behaviours, many clinical outcomes, healthcare costs and patient experience.^v

In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), access to self-care can play an even more significant role, as many people have limited access to health services.^{vi} Studies suggest that in these settings, non-prescription medicines have significantly reduced: “time to treatment” where access to health facilities is poor;^{vii} health expenditures for poor households;^{viii} and severity of symptoms.^{ix}

Contributing to universal health coverage through optimisation of healthcare expenditure and the reallocation of resources

Self-care is an important contributor to universal health coverage through savings in healthcare expenditure and the reallocation of resources by means of reduced use and pressure on healthcare systems.

Today, hundreds of non-prescription products use ingredients and dosages that were once only available by prescription (known as “Rx” medicines).^x The ability to switch the status of a medicine from prescription to non-prescription (known as “Rx to OTC switch”), when it is safe and appropriate to do so, is a key driver of access.^{xi} When products have a history of safe and appropriate use, switching them to non-prescription status can increase access for under-served consumers and in some cases, appropriate utilisation of medicines can increase.^{xii} For example, when smoking cessation products were first available without prescription in the US, their use increased by 150-200%, with the consequent increase in access enabling tens of thousands of smokers to use these products to help quit smoking.^{xiii}

Making non-prescription medicines and other consumer health products available to patients and consumers can have a material impact on healthcare system costs and national budgets through savings in healthcare professional (HCP) time and prescription costs, and increased productivity. Globally, \$119bn in cost containment and \$1.9tn in welfare spending is currently saved as a result of self-care interventions, with analysis predicting that these savings could rise to \$179bn and \$2.8tn in the future, respectively.^{xiv} In addition, 11bn hours of patients' time and 1.8bn hours of physicians' time is currently saved, with analysis showing that these figures could rise to 18bn hours and 2.8bn hours, respectively.^{xv}

However, not all potential savings are being realised. In a study of seven European countries, it was shown that an additional €11.5bn could be saved annually if there was an increase in the use of existing non-prescription medicines.^{xvi} These savings would mainly be achieved through a reduction of costs in primary and secondary care, without an equivalent transfer of cost to the individual.^{xvii} In the UK alone, an additional £2bn could be saved a year on the treatment of conditions suitable for self-care such as colds, indigestion, and muscle aches.^{xviii} Evidence suggests that appropriate switching of prescription to non-prescription medicines could also provide significant cost savings for national health budgets. In Canada, \$1bn could be saved annually with appropriate switches, education, and uptake.^{xix} Moving 5% of prescription medications to non-prescription status across Europe would result in estimated total annual savings of more than €16bn.^{xx}

Addressing barriers to self-care

There are several barriers that could limit the ability of individuals, communities, and health systems to utilise self-care and experience its benefits. United efforts by all stakeholders, from consumers to policymakers, are essential to addressing these barriers and ensuring that self-care behaviours are adopted across the world.

Health literacy

Health Literacy refers to the "knowledge, motivation, and competencies of people to access, understand, appraise and apply information to manage health in everyday life regarding health care, disease prevention and health promotion to maintain and promote quality of life during the life course." With our focus on everyday health, health literacy plays a significant role in how we do business. Understanding the needs of people at all levels of health literacy, and helping to build health literate communities, enables everyone to engage in and improve their everyday health.

*For more information, please see our [**position on health literacy and self-care**](#).*

Limited focus on prevention

Many chronic diseases can be considered to be largely preventable, and share the same behavioural risk factors, including smoking, alcohol consumption, unhealthy diets and physical inactivity.^{xxi} However, healthcare systems around the world fail to invest appropriately in prevention. For example, in European countries, prevention accounts for only 3% of the total healthcare budget.^{xxii} Globally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international economic organisation with 38 member countries, has found that spending on preventative care and disease prevention averages at around 2.7% of their members' total healthcare expenditure. Alongside increasing financial investments in disease prevention, there is also a need to expand the focus on prevention as part of the HCP curricula, helping to shift the focus to preventative care in the longer term.

The effective use of prevention programmes involving self-care can contribute to additional cost savings. For example, encouraging daily toothbrushing with fluoridated toothpaste has been shown to be a highly effective intervention to prevent tooth cavities in children in the USA, saving around four times the cost of the preventative programme through reduced treatment costs.^{xxiii} There are further additional benefits through increased productivity: people suffering from pain, cold and flu, or other conditions treatable with non-prescription medicines or other consumer health products may be able to return to daily life more easily, including work or education. In Mexico, this has been shown to have potential savings of 195m MXP (equivalent to over £7.6m, or over \$9.6m) a year.^{xxiv}

Current structure of national healthcare systems

Self-care should not be viewed in isolation of HCPs and their role in supporting individuals to become better managers of their everyday health. However, self-care is not currently established as a core pillar of national health strategies, often falling between prevention and treatment in a formal health setting (such as that provided in a primary care facility, or in a hospital).^{xxv} Policymakers and HCPs must commit to establishing self-care as a policy priority, in order to incentivise regulatory reforms and further innovation, and to free up HCP resources, allowing them to dedicate more time to those most in need. Pharmacists are a good example of HCPs that could have a more prominent role in self-care.

The role of pharmacists in self-care

Pharmacists are at the heart of the communities they serve and are the most accessible health experts. By taking a patient-centred approach, pharmacists provide evidence-based, accurate, and accessible self-care information to guide people to make well-informed choices in pharmacy and beyond. This includes information around healthy life choices, recommending appropriate non-prescription medications, identifying when people should consult a physician, and educating patients on how to interact with health information. We believe there are further opportunities to enable pharmacists to fulfil their potential in supporting individual wellbeing and promoting self-care interventions, which can be achieved through targeted policy interventions, supported by all stakeholders.

*For more information on the role of policy in supporting pharmacists to play their role in self-care, please see our **position on the role of pharmacists in self-care**.*

Policy recommendations

To realise its full value, self-care must be established as a policy priority. We therefore believe that governments, policymakers, health systems, regulators, industry, trade associations, HCPs, and citizens should work together to:

- Enable increased access to new and innovative self-care products, non-prescription medicines and emerging, effective digital health products, while maintaining access to existing options.
- Recognise the value of non-prescription medicines and other consumer health products as an essential component of primary healthcare, by encouraging individuals to use self-care where appropriate: as a preventative measure; to treat acute and self-limiting conditions; and/or as part of managing longer-term conditions.
- Ensure that those participating in self-care have high levels of health literacy, and accurate up-to-date information in line with local regulations and best practice, to make safe and informed decisions.

*For more information on how we engage policymakers, please see our **position on political advocacy**.*

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