

# Awareness of 'Self Care' in Cheshire

March 2018



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# Overview

## Context

In view of the NHS being under greater pressure than ever before, and some people raising issues regarding being unable to obtain medical appointments, Healthwatch Cheshire East and Healthwatch Cheshire West have been aware of the priorities and campaigns of the local Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) to promote 'Self Care' as a concept to the population of Cheshire.

During engagement activity with the public it became evident that awareness of 'Self Care' is variable amongst the population, and so we decided to undertake a small study to ascertain whether people in Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester recognise the campaigns of 'Self Care', what they think about it, and if it is something which they practice. We were also able to use this study as a signposting exercise to inform people about the 'Self Care' message.

## 'Self Care'

'Self Care' is the name of a campaign given to cover a broad concept defined by the Self Care Forum<sup>1</sup> as "the actions that individuals take for themselves, on behalf of and with others in order to develop, protect, maintain and improve their health, wellbeing or wellness." This ranges on a scale from daily choices and lifestyle, self-managed and minor ailments, to management of long-term conditions.

This leads to questions regarding what daily choices are people making that contribute to their health and wellbeing and how regularly they exercise, smoke or drink alcohol. Minor ailments that can be self-managed often include colds, sore throats, headaches, coughs and joint pain. According to the Self Care Forum, there is on average 57 million GP consultations every year for minor ailments at a total cost to the NHS of £2 billion, which takes up, on average, an hour a day for every GP.

The reasons people visit GPs with minor ailments are perceived to be a lack of confidence in understanding the normal progress of symptoms, the perceived severity and duration of symptoms, reassurance that nothing more serious is wrong, and prescription to 'cure' the illness even though the same medicine may be available over-the-counter.

In order to combat this, the NHS nationally have launched campaigns to raise awareness of 'Self Care' and steps that people can take to improve their health and wellbeing without having to see a medical professional. In Cheshire; West Cheshire, Vale Royal, South Cheshire, and East Cheshire CCGs are promoting 'Self Care' locally. This includes campaigns to stock your medicine cabinet for less than £10 in order to combat minor conditions at home, knowing how long it takes for minor ailments to clear, knowing what symptoms can be treated at a pharmacy, and also advertising NHS 111 and NHS Choices services.

'Self Care' is not just dealing with minor ailments but can also include looking after your general wellbeing which ultimately is preventative of becoming ill further down the line. For example, a healthy diet, exercise, limiting alcohol intake and not smoking, and also practicing meditation and mindfulness, can all contribute to physical and mental wellbeing and be referred to as Self Care.

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<sup>1</sup> The Self Care Forum is the national campaign group for 'Self Care' in the UK, with the aim of furthering the reach of 'Self Care' and embed it into everyday life ([www.selfcareforum.org](http://www.selfcareforum.org))

# What we did

## Where did we conduct our study?

In order to provide a broad sample of people's awareness of 'Self Care', Healthwatch conducted engagement activity in various locations within Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester. This allowed us to receive a sample of responses from users of services in the four Clinical Commissioning Group areas which operate within the two local authorities; namely West Cheshire CCG, East Cheshire CCG, Vale Royal CCG and South Cheshire CCG. This then enabled us to identify if there are common themes or different levels of awareness in each CCG area. Respondents from our sample were largely engaged with at GP Surgeries across these CCGs, although some responses were received at other Healthwatch Cheshire East and Healthwatch Cheshire West engagement events.

Healthwatch Cheshire East and Healthwatch Cheshire West would like to thank our volunteers for their support in conducting engagement at venues in Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester.

People were engaged with about 'Self Care' at the following locations to create our sample of 59 people:

### Cheshire East

- Connected Communities event at Crosville Social Club, Crewe
- Holmes Chapel Health Centre
- Manchester Road Surgery, Knutsford
- Nantwich Health Centre
- Waters Green Medical Centre, Macclesfield

### Cheshire West and Chester

- Northwich Library
- Welcome Wednesday event at Trinity Church, Ellesmere Port
- Whitby Group Practice, Ellesmere Port

This ensured we were able to speak to a sample of people from various areas within the two local authorities.

## When did we conduct our study?

The research was completed during the winter period from November 2017 to February 2018, which anecdotally has been one of the toughest periods in recent years for the NHS.

Engagement that took place was largely in the mid-mornings and mid-afternoons in weekdays, for two-hour periods at each venue.

Nationally, Self Care Week took place on 13-19<sup>th</sup> November 2017, and Healthwatch Cheshire was able to attend various events arranged by the CCGs in order to promote 'Self Care', which was a good opportunity for us to ask people what they thought about the campaigns and their message.

## Summary of Findings

The main findings from our sample study across Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester are:

- Our findings indicate a reasonably even split between people who had heard of ‘Self Care’ and those who had not.
- This varied by local authority as in Cheshire West and Chester more people had heard of the campaign than had not, whereas in Cheshire East more people who we asked had not heard of ‘Self Care’.
- What people perceive ‘Self Care’ to be seems to be in line with the campaigns being run. Responses in particular focused on minor ailments, pharmacies and mental health.
- Many people who have heard of Self Care think that it is ‘common sense’ and is a positive thing in stopping people from going straight to their GP Surgery and taking up appointments for minor ailments.
- The general perception of people we spoke to who consider themselves to practice ‘Self Care’ is that they try to manage long-term conditions and self-treat minor ailments using over the counter medicines and their local pharmacy so that they do not need to go visit the GP.
- People also consider ‘Self Care’ to be preventative in keeping fit and maintaining a healthy mental wellbeing.

### Dissemination

In order to ensure that the study achieves Healthwatch’s key aims of sharing the public’s views on Health and Social Care with those who commission services in order to affect positive change, this report has been shared with the following:

- The public via publication on the Healthwatch Cheshire East and Healthwatch Cheshire West websites.<sup>2</sup>
- West Cheshire, Vale Royal, South Cheshire, and East Cheshire CCGs

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<sup>2</sup> [www.healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk/reports](http://www.healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk/reports)  
[www.healthwatchcwac.org.uk/reports](http://www.healthwatchcwac.org.uk/reports)

## What we asked

The study took the form of conversations whilst at engagement events with people centred around three main questions to direct conversation:

- Have you heard about ‘Self Care’?
- Do you practice ‘Self Care’?
- What do you think about the message of ‘Self Care’?

These questions were predominantly used as prompts to draw out the views of people regarding ‘Self Care’, and so throughout we were able to find out what people actually perceived ‘Self Care’ to be as well as their opinions of it and whether they practice it.

We spoke to a total of 59 respondents at engagement events with the aim of an equal sample from each local authority. Ultimately however, we received more responses from residents in Cheshire East. The number of responses received by local authority was as follows:

Cheshire East	39
Cheshire West and Chester	20
Total	59

The number of responses received by CCG area was:

West Cheshire CCG	13
Vale Royal CCG	7
South Cheshire CCG	18
East Cheshire CCG	21
Total	59

The number of responses reflects West Cheshire CCG covering a larger area of Cheshire West and Chester than Vale Royal CCG, and also the closeness with which Vale Royal and South Cheshire CCGs work together.

# What people told us

## Have you heard about 'Self Care'?

This question sought to determine how well known the campaign and message of 'Self Care' is amongst the people of Cheshire. Two people did not indicate a response to this question.

CCG	Yes	No
West Cheshire CCG	9	4
Vale Royal CCG	4	1
South Cheshire CCG	13	5
East Cheshire CCG	3	18
<b>Cheshire West and Chester Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Cheshire East Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Total (all areas)</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>28</b>

- Responses to this indicate a reasonably even split between people we spoke to who had heard of 'Self Care' and those who had not.
- It is notable that this is represented by a different picture in Cheshire West and Chester where more people had heard of the campaign than had not, to Cheshire East where more people who we asked had not heard of 'Self Care'.
- Interestingly, when narrowed down even further, it is in East Cheshire CCG area where the majority of people in Cheshire East had not heard of 'Self Care'.
- In South Cheshire CCG area, where there has been a big promotion of the campaign alongside Vale Royal CCG especially during Self Care Week, more people had heard of the message than had not. This suggests that greater promotion of 'Self Care' needs to take place in East Cheshire CCG.

**Number of respondents who have heard about 'Self Care' by Local Authority (%)**



## What people think 'Self Care' is

Our questions did not specifically ask people what they perceived 'Self Care' to be, but this was something that came out during a lot of the discussions we had, either through people telling us whether they had heard about it or whether they consider themselves to practice it.

When asked if they had heard of 'Self Care' and what they think about it, respondents who used this as an opportunity to tell us what they perceived it to be told us:

### Minor Ailments and Health Management

- *"Keep everything clean. Lots of tablets every day."*
- *"NHS Choices."*
- *"Well stocked cabinet, kids' stuff."*
- *"Looking up how to manage condition. Pharmacy."*
- *"It's about not going straight to the doctor."*
- *"Minor ailments."*
- *"I've always done it. It's common sense. Don't rush to your doctors, some expect magic from their GP."*
- *"Use your pharmacist and look after yourself. Don't eat and drink too much. Don't run to the GP straight away give it a few days."*
- *"Look after yourself at home. Do this first before seeing your doctor."*
- *"Use chemist who advise to go to GP if needed."*
- *"Going to chemist rather than GP."*
- *"Go to pharmacist or GP."*
- *"Something to do with flu clinic."*
- *"Look at other options before the GP. Go to pharmacist, online, etc."*
- *"Caring for yourself."*
- *"Knowing where to go for help."*

### Health and Wellbeing

- *"I meditate at home."*
- *"Staying fit mentally, physically, spiritually."*
- *"Not about medicine it's about management of mental health. Diet to reduce acid in stomach."*
- *"Diet, exercise, don't smoke/drink, think sensibly about medication."*
- *"Looking after yourself."*
- *"Do what you can."*
- *"Preventative programme of things."*

This demonstrates some variation in what people perceive 'Self Care' to be. Most of it does however seem to be in line with the campaigns being run, apart from the one person who believed it to not be about medicine. It was particularly notable that responses seemed to focus on minor ailments, pharmacies and the management of conditions through medicines, as well as on mental health.

This suggests that the importance of looking after mental health as well as physical health is translating to the public. It also suggests that the message regarding 'Self Care' partly being about managing conditions and self medicating for minor ailments is getting through. Many people also commented that they believed 'Self Care' to be about looking after yourself which although is a general phrase, can also be termed to suggest people perceive 'Self Care' to be almost preventative to avoid needing medical treatment.

## What do you think about the message of 'Self Care'?

Healthwatch then asked people what they think about the message of 'Self Care', in order to get their feedback on the concept.

### 'Common Sense'

There was a lot of positivity about 'Self Care', with no real negativity. Seven people commented that they thought it was "common sense" and was something that is just done naturally, for example:

- *"It's common sense. I will happily see the Pharmacist as opposed to the doctor and self manage my condition with OTC [over the counter] medicines."*
- *"It is common sense but I think people run to the doctor."*
- *"I don't think of 'Self Care' as it is something that comes natural."*
- *"Very important. Everyone should do it."*

### Not going to the GP

Another common piece of feedback from people was that 'Self Care' helps to relieve pressure on the NHS and frees up GP appointments. This is because people are not needing to see the doctor if they are looking after themselves and self-treating for minor ailments. Some people we spoke to suggested that it is down to the individual to make sure they are healthy, not of anyone else. Comments included:

- *"Saves pressures on the NHS."*
- *"Good idea it saves wasted appointments."*
- *"Useful to save time for people who need to see the GP."*
- *"I've always done it. It's common sense. Don't rush to your doctors, some expect magic from their GP."*
- *"I would rather do that; the doctors are the last resort."*
- *"Makes sense, too easy to go to the doctors without making an effort themselves."*
- *"I think the problem with 'Self Care' as a message is that it is quite general. I kind of see it as something that everyone should be doing at a basic level though. People should naturally be looking after themselves in order to help prevent getting ill, and then should be trying to treat themselves or wait for problems to get better before going straight to the doctor. You would hope that that would all be common sense and wouldn't need to be promoted, but if people aren't doing this then it needs to be made sure that they are. So much more resources and time could be better spent on people that need the help than people who go to the doctor with just a cough or sore throat instead of waiting for it to clear naturally."*

### Going to the Pharmacy

In relation to this, there was some praise for pharmacists, with many several people stating that they like the fact that they can visit a pharmacy for treatment and advice regarding minor ailments rather than have to visit a GP. It can therefore be seen that this is a positive message around 'Self Care' that can aid further promotion. Comments included:

- *"Very good. Nice to be able to talk to the pharmacist for triage. I've used 111 if any doubts sent to hospital."*
- *"Quite happy. I had to visit pharmacist, not a bad thing, maybe someone not as forthcoming might not get treated."*

- *“A good idea. Use chemist who advise to go to GP if needed.”*

There was one slightly negative comment regarding visiting pharmacies for minor ailments relating to medical records and history:

- *“Ok unless you need to refer to medical history not easily resolved.”*

It could though be argued that any condition that requires referring to a person’s medical history may well be something more serious than a minor ailment and would be more appropriately treated by a GP.

## **Self-Empowerment**

Further pieces of positive feedback regarding the message of ‘Self Care’ related to the element of empowerment it gives people in being control of their own health and being able to take preventative steps to prevent them from needing medical help, or to treat themselves effectively without needing to seek professional help. Comments included:

- *“Good - lets you take control.”*
- *“Feeling of empowerment - you are in charge of your body.”*

## **Need to Educate**

Surrounding the positive messages around ‘Self Care’ was a feeling that not only does the message need to be promoted to persuade more people to actually practice it, but there needs to be an education amongst some people as to how people should actually be looking after themselves and practice ‘Self Care’. This slightly contradicts comments made by some people that ‘Self Care’ is common sense and something that everyone should know how to practice. There were also a couple of comments that suggested it was too broad as a concept and that was why people were struggling to take the message on board. For example:

- *“For a lot of people ‘Self Care’ is not taught - need to educate people.”*
- *“I don't think it is out there enough.”*
- *“Wonderful thing but is too broad and so there is a lack of general understanding of what it is. If you want people to grasp it, it needs to be punchier and better directed.”*
- *“I think the problem with ‘Self Care’ as a message is that it is quite general.”*
- *“I don't think of ‘Self Care’ as it is something that comes natural. However, there are people who are unable through illness or other ailments, including mental health, who are not in a position to carry out ‘Self Care’ functions. This can lead to isolation, a feeling of being less worthy, self harm, obesity, alcoholism, drug dependency, withdrawal from society. Therefore, at times ‘Self Care’ has to be provided by a third party, be it parent, guardian, carer or outside agent. So therefore, it is a very important message that needs to be constantly promoted within all communities, covering all strands of life.”*

This suggests there is more work to be done by the CCGs and Public Health in order to promote the ‘Self Care’ message and also to educate people as the message is not really in the public consciousness as much as it could be.

## Do you practice 'Self Care'?

This question sought to determine whether people feel that they do practice 'Self Care'. This also enabled Healthwatch Cheshire to gain more of an insight into what it is people do to practice 'Self Care', and therefore telling us more about what people think 'Self Care' is.

In response to this question, only 4 out of 59 people (7%) we spoke to said that they did not feel that they practice 'Self Care', including one person who said they do not think they practice it enough. Some people simply told us whether or not they practiced 'Self Care', others told us what it is they do to practice 'Self Care'. A few people said that it was a natural thing, almost following on from the 'common sense' theme raised in the previous question. For example:

- *"We have always looked after ourselves."*
- *"Yes. It's an everyday life activity."*

### Not going to the GP

As discussed above regarding what people think of 'Self Care', there were a group of people who considered themselves to practice 'Self Care' because they do not regularly visit their GP. Comments included:

- *"I suppose I do, I don't go to the doctor for every ache and pain."*
- *"Yes, use the doctors as the last resort."*
- *"No faith in doctors, have to look after own health. Follow advice from specialist."*
- *"Yes. Don't see a GP unless I need to."*
- *"Yes. I wouldn't really go to the doctor unless I had a problem that just wouldn't go away or something that felt more serious. Just wait for minor ailments to clear up and take some tablets usually."*

Interestingly, one person believed that they practiced 'Self Care' by visiting the GP regularly, which contradicts the ideas of other respondents who believe 'Self Care' to be the opposite.

### Minor Ailments and Managing Medication

The most commonly raised theme by which the people we spoke to considered themselves to practice 'Self Care' is through their treatment of minor ailments and management of medication. This involves self-treatment of minor ailments, visiting the pharmacy, using Out of Hours services, and people managing their prescriptions and progress for long-term conditions. These comments included:

- *"Yes, I get over the counter medicines where I can."*
- *"Yes, I ensure that I have OTC medicines so I can look after myself."*
- *"Yes, paracetamol and cough medicine."*
- *"Weekly tablets three times a day with a weekly delivery because of being bi-polar."*
- *"Do self-medicate if possible."*
- *"Use Out of Hours regarding panic attacks."*
- *"I use the pharmacy."*
- *"I am diabetic and have been on insulin for 40 years. I take responsibility for having blood tests, blood pressure, weight control."*
- *"Yes. Minor colds - water, rest and paracetamol."*
- *"Yes - try the pharmacy first."*
- *"Just wait for minor ailments to clear up and take some tablets usually."*

## Health and Wellbeing

The other theme raised by people practicing 'Self Care' was in regards to keeping fit both physically and mentally. This demonstrates that some people perceive 'Self Care' to be preventative as much as being about dealing with minor ailments and not going to the GP. Comments included:

- *"I try to keep fit such as walking and aqua fit so I don't have to take so much medication."*
- *"Yes - meditation helps."*
- *"Exercise class at the Heart Foundation. Do walking. Know about Self Care. Important to meet people."*
- *"I look after myself, keep fit, flu jab."*
- *"Try and keep myself fit and keep weight off. Flu jab."*
- *"Yes. Exercise."*
- *"It's also important to exercise enough, do lots of activities and spend time with people so to help mental wellbeing - social isolation causes all sorts of problems otherwise."*

From these responses it is evident that the general perception of people we spoke to who consider themselves to practice 'Self Care' is that they try to manage long-term conditions and self-treat minor ailments using over the counter medicines and their local pharmacy so that they do not need to go visit the GP. People also consider 'Self Care' to be preventative in keeping fit and maintaining a healthy mental wellbeing.

## Conclusion



'Self Care' is not something of which a large amount of Healthwatch Cheshire East and Healthwatch Cheshire West's sample population is necessarily aware. There was a reasonably even split between people who had heard of 'Self Care' and those who had not. This varied by local authority as in Cheshire West and Chester more people had heard of the campaign than had not, whereas in Cheshire East more people who we asked had not heard of 'Self Care'.

When explained to people, or when people were asked what they thought 'Self Care' was, they came up with a variety of replies which were all relevant to 'Self Care'. This suggests that people understand parts of the concept of 'Self Care' but are not necessarily aware of it as a whole campaign branded as 'Self Care'. This was perhaps illustrated by the various people who told us that they perceived 'Self Care' to be something that people should do as an 'everyday life activity', suggesting they had not necessarily heard of it as a campaign and thought of it as 'common sense'. Therefore, it would be recommended that the NHS look to promote the campaign of 'Self Care' to a greater level as an all-round message that encompasses all of the things that go into 'Self Care'.

The varying descriptions our sample provided us with in regards to what they perceive 'Self Care' to be demonstrates that perhaps it is too broad a concept to easily promote. There is not a great deal of clarity from the 'Self Care' campaign as to what it does and does not encompass and as a result people seem to be able to recall parts of what 'Self Care' is but not every aspect of it. It appears to mean different things to different people.

The broad themes we established that respondents were telling us they perceived 'Self Care' to be seems to be in line with the campaigns being run. Responses in particular focused on minor ailments, pharmacies, physical wellbeing and mental health, but as noted above very few responses encompassed all of these. People who told Healthwatch Cheshire that they practice 'Self Care' generally try to manage long-term conditions and self-treat minor ailments using over the counter medicines and their local pharmacy so that they do not need to visit the GP. People also consider 'Self Care' to be preventative in keeping fit and maintaining a healthy mental wellbeing.

As noted above, many people in our sample who have heard of 'Self Care' think that it is 'common sense' and should be regularly practiced almost naturally. People are also readily able to describe features of it, if not all of it. Lots of respondents see 'Self Care' as a positive thing in stopping people from going straight to their GP Surgery and taking up appointments for minor ailments. Therefore, if the NHS were to put a greater emphasis on promoting Self Care as a campaign, it would likely be well received by the general public and increase effectiveness.