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## **AESGP Evidence Summary**

**Self-care in times of pandemic and beyond:  
looking back a year after**

June 2021



# Self-care in times of pandemic and beyond

In December 2019, symptoms of a pneumonia with unknown source were reported to China's National Health Commission in Wuhan, China. Seven days later, a new virus, now known as "Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus 2" (SARS-CoV 2) or "COVID-19" was identified <sup>(1)</sup>. In less than three months, the disease caused by this virus was declared a "pandemic" by the World Health Organisation (WHO) <sup>(2)</sup>. This pandemic has already resulted in extreme societal, economic and political disruption across the world <sup>(3)</sup>. **Self-care has played a crucial role in addressing a number of health system and societal challenges raised by the pandemic.**

## What is self-care?

Self-care has been defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as *"the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, and maintain health and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health-care provider"* <sup>(4)</sup>.

Self-care begins with everyday behaviours, usually learned in childhood, such as washing hands, following a balanced diet, ensuring oral hygiene and using over-the-counter medication as appropriate for minor illnesses. As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, self-care contributes to preventing infections by enabling people to stay at home where possible. It also helps to ensure that healthcare resources are available for those most in need of expert medical help.

The **evidence indicates that supporting self-care has benefits for people's** attitudes and behaviours, quality of life, clinical symptoms and use of healthcare resources <sup>(5)</sup>.

According to the WHO, self-medication is an important element of self-care. This is defined as the taking of medicines to heal self-diagnosed problems or the self-administration of medications prescribed by a doctor in case of chronic diseases, recurring episodes, or symptoms <sup>(6)</sup>. In addition to making more efficient use of healthcare resources and freeing up time for doctors to focus on severe cases, responsible self-medication allows greater empowerment of people by involving them in their own treatment <sup>(7)(8)</sup>. All of these constitute major advantages at a time when healthcare systems are inundated with COVID-19 cases.

## Behavioural changes towards more self-care during the pandemic

The profound changes in life routines and a colossal flow of information about COVID-19 have led to unprecedented levels of anxiety and fear. A global study published in October 2020 confirmed that the majority of respondents had low or mild levels of depression and anxiety symptoms during the pandemic, while a significant proportion of respondents reported moderate to severe symptoms of depression (25.4%) and anxiety/fear (19.5%) <sup>(9)</sup>. The two key factors causing this high rate of fear and anxiety are COVID-19's high level of transmissibility and its fatality rate, especially for older people <sup>(10)</sup>.



These widely reported feelings of anxiety and fear provide context for the panic-buying of certain foods and home care items observed in February and March 2020, when the pandemic had just reached Europe. Panic-buying is a phenomenon reported in the past, in crises like the SARS outbreak in China in 2003 <sup>(11)</sup> or after the Japanese earthquake in 2011 <sup>(12)</sup>, and is a response to the perceived lack of control regarding the future and social demands <sup>(13)</sup>. This sense of loss of control has a significant impact on stress levels. **Buying more than usual amounts of certain types of products is a way of coping with these feelings of uncertainty, and seen as an act of self-preservation** <sup>(14)</sup>.

This phenomenon was observed in self-care practice, too. In March 2020, there was a significant spike in sales of over-the-counter products containing paracetamol. There were two obvious reasons. Firstly, fever is one of the most common symptoms of COVID-19 and paracetamol is one of the most popular antipyretic drug options. Secondly, there were reports – later proved to be unfounded – that ibuprofen, a common alternative to paracetamol, could negatively affect outcomes of the disease. Subsequent investigations found insufficient evidence to support the claim <sup>(15)</sup> (see chapter *Misinformation and infodemics*), but it had already received widespread media attention <sup>(16)</sup>. This spike in paracetamol sales overlaps perfectly with the beginning of the

“first wave” of the COVID-19 pandemic. A marked, although less extreme, rise in sales was also observed in September and October 2020, when the “second wave” of infections had massive implications worldwide <sup>(17)</sup>.

In France, nearly 42% of the community pharmacists surveyed by AFIPA have reported an increase in the advice given to prevent or treat minor ailments during the pandemic <sup>(18)</sup>. This is further supported by a survey carried by IPSOS on behalf of GSK, where 65% of people across Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK said they are more likely to consider their health in day-to-day decision-making <sup>(19)</sup>. In a study carried by PAGB in the UK, 1 in 4 people said that the pandemic made them change their attitude towards self-care <sup>(20)</sup>. Overall, **we have observed during the year 2020 increasing interest in self-care all across Europe and a general trend that people are more willing to treat minor ailments themselves or to ask for advice from pharmacists** <sup>(21) (22) (23)</sup>. This **interest in self-care has helped to relieve the pressure on the national health systems that were overloaded with COVID-19 patients**. Furthermore, a significant proportion of Europeans are now taking extra precautions to avoid illness-transmission <sup>(24)</sup>. Vitamins and tonics have registered significant growth in 2020, which confirms a growing interest in prevention and maintaining good health <sup>(25)</sup>.

## The use of technology during the pandemic

The 2019 Eurostat survey on *The use of Internet in households and by individuals* showed that more than half of EU citizens (53%) aged 16-74 reported seeking online health information related to injury, disease, nutrition, improving health or similar, in the three preceding months <sup>(26)</sup>.

In efforts to limit personal contacts and spare healthcare resources, people have undoubtedly used online resources even more when taking care of themselves in 2020 <sup>(27)</sup>.

Mandatory social distancing and avoiding unnecessary contact also prompted more remote consultations by healthcare professionals (telemedicine <sup>(28)</sup>), such as general practitioners. This allowed telemedicine to grow at a faster rate than ever before, filling in the void left by the sudden changes in admission/scheduling procedures <sup>(29) (30) (31)</sup>. According to recent surveys <sup>(32) (33) (34)</sup>, telemedicine has its clear advantages. During 2020, it has proven to be a viable alternative to regular face-to-face appointments, and an effective complementary tool to assist the population.



Another observed trend was a change in buying behaviours, with a preference for greater use of e-commerce. This fact is reflected in ePharmacy transactions growth over 2020 <sup>(35) (36)</sup>.



## Misinformation and infodemics

On February 15th 2020, WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said: “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic.”<sup>(37)</sup> The WHO, through its “Information Network for Epidemics” (EPI-WIN) platform<sup>(38)</sup>, has fought misinformation circulating on social media since the very first day. However, the WHO’s work has been reactive and it cannot realistically monitor all of the inaccurate information spreading over the internet.

In March 2020, there were reports, especially on social media, which raised questions about whether non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, could worsen coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Although this proved later to be unfounded, the theory was supported at least temporarily by some in the scientific community<sup>(39)</sup>. As a consequence, it led to panic-buying and temporary shortages of certain paracetamol-containing products at pharmacy level (see previous chapter, *Behavioural changes towards more self-care during the pandemic*)<sup>(40)</sup>.

In relation to ibuprofen, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) issued a statement aiming to provide reassurance to people and healthcare professionals.

It read: “There is currently no scientific evidence estab-



lishing a link between ibuprofen and worsening of COVID 19. EMA is monitoring the situation closely and will review any new information that becomes available on this issue in the context of the pandemic”<sup>(41)</sup>, followed by reaction from a number of national authorities<sup>(42) (43) (44)</sup>.

This is one of many examples showing how misinformation can have damaging effects and fuel further fears amongst the general public. **Swift reactions from reputable sources such as regulators are essential, and effective health communication is a key factor in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic**<sup>(45)</sup>.

## COVID-19 learnings: what is likely to stay?

We, at the Self-Care Industry, and as members of society, have learned valuable lessons during the pandemic. Although it is not over, the health community and society at large have already started to reflect on the experiences and to build on them to ensure our health systems can handle any future crisis in a better, more efficient way<sup>(46)</sup>.

Efforts to encourage individuals to think of self-care as their first step in healthcare when dealing with health issues that are self-manageable should continue. **They must be empowered to take a more active role, by being provided with trusted information and professional support, including online.** As well as benefiting individuals, this has the potential to reduce the burden on healthcare services and save on medical expenses.

**Health literacy plays a crucial role in encouraging responsible choices about our health.** It has been shown that self-care increases with the level of education<sup>(47) (48)</sup>. Therefore, it is important to strive for a life-

long learning approach towards the health of the population, starting at high school level<sup>(49)</sup>, or even before, while emphasizing the role of the pharmacist in assisting us in managing our health<sup>(50) (51)</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the progress of healthcare digitalisation, and provided the motivation and reasoning to make us further explore how various technologies can be used in healthcare. We are looking at a future where more and more consultations will happen online, and where we will be offering more digital services around self-care products<sup>(52)</sup> to further empower people, better understand their use of self-care products and their needs. In the light of these developments, **we hope that the European regulatory framework will increasingly recognize the powerful role self-care can play in healthcare.** We urge that they will adapt and recognize the value of digital innovation<sup>(53)</sup> as provided by self-care product manufacturers.

Together with our stakeholders network, we will continue to work, in the name of AESGP, towards greater



general understanding of self-care and healthcare. This can be achieved by enhancing access to accurate information from trusted sources, but also by improving the existing tools we have at our disposal. The implementation of electronic Product Information to complement the paper leaflet could be the first step in this direction <sup>(54)</sup>.

Last but not least, we must not forget that all of us should strive to include self-care in our daily lives and to take a more active role in managing our own health. Such important teaching should start early in life, both at home and at school.

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## About

The **Association of the European Self-Care Industry (AESGP)** is a non-profit organisation which represents the manufacturers of non-prescription medicines, food supplements and self-care medical devices in Europe, an area also referred to as consumer healthcare products.

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