

# On The Pill: Contraception and Coronavirus

## FAST FACTS

- The Scottish Government has suggested people should think hard about whether the Coronavirus crisis is the right time to try for a baby. It has also advised that people try to reduce pressure on GP services.
- It is therefore necessary to consider the arrangements for accessing contraceptive services during the crisis, and whether necessary restrictions on accessing GP surgeries makes this harder.
- Reform Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government's decision to expand Minor Ailment Services, delivered through pharmacies, to everyone.
- As part of the expansion, we believe the Scottish Government should consider what other medical issues could also be dealt with by pharmacies at this time, helping relieve pressure on GP surgeries.
- Specifically, this should include prescribing the contraceptive pill, ensuring women can still access this key drug without problem, but with the necessary guidance and advice.

## CONTEXT

During the current Covid-19 outbreak we are all trying to follow guidance and relieve pressure on front-line NHS services, including GP surgeries.

Regardless of the current crisis, people will still need advice and treatment for other medical issues.

The Scottish Government announced that it has extended the Minor Ailment Service offered by pharmacies, previously only available to certain groups of people, to anyone presenting at a chemist.

Reform Scotland welcomes this move, but calls on the Scottish Government to go further and expand the services available under Minor Ailment Services at this time.

Specifically, women should be able to access their contraceptive pill through the service while relieving pressure on stretched GP surgeries.

## BACKGROUND

On 23 March the First Minister announced in her daily statement that the Minor Ailment Service, operated by pharmacies, was being expanded during the current Covid-19 crisis.<sup>1</sup>

NHS Circular, PCA (P)(2020) 5, confirmed that the Minor Ailment Service (MAS) would now be available to everyone:

*“Community pharmacy teams will be able to offer MAS consultations to anyone presenting at the pharmacy, effective from Monday 23 March 2020.”<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/first-minister-covid-19-update-1/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/pca/PCA2020\(P\)05.pdf](https://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/pca/PCA2020(P)05.pdf)

### Minor Ailment Service

The Minor Ailment Service previously covered only the following groups of individuals:

- Under 16s;
- Under 19s in full-time education;
- Over 60s;
- Those with a valid maternity exemption certificate, medical exemption certificate, or war pension exemption certificate;
- Those on Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, or Pension Credit Guarantee Credit, and their family members;
- Those in receipt of Universal Credit, subject to certain income thresholds, and their family members;
- Asylum-seekers;
- Those named on, or entitled to, an NHS tax credit exemption certificate or a valid HC2 certificate.<sup>3</sup>

Minor Ailment Service is where individuals can have a consultation with a pharmacist, receive advice and, in some cases, have medicine prescribed for minor issues. The prescription would be free of charge, just as it would have been had the individual visited a GP with the complaint.

Where the pharmacist considers the condition is one that requires to be seen by another member of the primary care team (such as a GP), the pharmacist will refer the patient on.

This means that community pharmacies can act as the first port of call and reduce pressure on GP surgeries.

The following list from the Scottish Government covers a number of the minor illnesses included in the scheme:<sup>4</sup>

- acne
- athlete's foot
- backache
- cold sores
- constipation
- cough
- diarrhoea
- earache
- eczema and allergies
- haemorrhoids (piles)
- hay fever
- headache
- head lice
- indigestion
- mouth ulcers
- nasal congestion
- pain
- period pain
- thrush
- sore throat
- threadworms
- warts and verrucae

The pharmacist, like a GP, can only give out certain medicines and products, so may not prescribe the same brand or produce someone has ordinarily bought, however it will be free of charge.

In addition to the list above, the Pharmacy First scheme also allows pharmacies to advise and treat patients, including prescribing antibiotics, for those with uncomplicated urinary tract infections and Impetigo.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/pca/PCA2016\(P\)12.pdf](https://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/pca/PCA2016(P)12.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/nhs-minor-ailment-service-local->

[pharmacy/](#)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cps.scot/nhs-services/national/pharmacy-first/>

## Covid-19

Due to social distancing measures, many GP practices are restricting face-to-face consultations, including with practice nurses, though many will still offer phone consultations, with any necessary prescription to be picked up at a chemist.

There have been concerns expressed across the UK that current restrictions in place due to Covid-19 could have unintentional consequences on women's bodies. Emma Barnett, journalist and author of the book 'Period', wrote:<sup>6</sup>

*"At a time where there are also concerns about women and men being holed up together, with difficulty in getting coils fitted and access to the contraceptive pill (which, yes, also still requires a visit to a GP for initial prescription or renewal – GPs who none of us can easily see or should burden right now), a potential coronavirus baby boom does not naturally mean all of those pregnancies are wanted."*

The issue of pregnancy, and by association, contraception, was raised in questions with the First Minister in her daily briefing on 26<sup>th</sup> March.<sup>7</sup> She deferred to the then Chief Medical Officer Dr Catherine Calderwood, who commented:

*"It has been suggested to me that we talk to people about contraception. And about really thinking about the fact that 50% of all pregnancies are unplanned. We would always encourage people to think on their own health: 'Is this the right time for me to start thinking about having a baby?'"<sup>8</sup>*

Given this advice, we should be making it easier for women to access contraception. However, the necessary restrictions in place due to social distancing could, in some circumstances, actually

make it harder for some people to access such help.

Many pharmacies already provide the contraceptive pill without a GP prescription. For example, Superdrug allows you to order up to 6 months' worth of the contraceptive pill online.<sup>9</sup> However, people have to pay for the drug.

In the current crisis, when many are facing cuts in wages, hours or the loss of a job, paying for contraception is a luxury some will not be able to afford. We cannot get to a situation that the pill is easily accessible only for those who can afford it.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**As part of the current expansion of the Minor Ailment Service, allow the contraceptive pill to be prescribed by pharmacies. Consideration should also be given to what other medical issues could be handled effectively under a Pharmacy First scheme, as part of a strategy to reduce pressure on GP surgeries.**

The Scottish Government has suggested people should consider whether the Coronavirus crisis is the right time to try for a baby; it has also advised that people try to reduce pressure on GP services.

Considering the arrangements for women to access contraceptive services is a necessary next step.

Reform Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government's decision to open Minor Ailment Services to everyone, but we believe they should go further and expand the services that can be provided during this time.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/29/state-control-womens-bodies-covid-19-crisis?>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thenational.scot/news/18337483.coronavirus-fm-asked-advice-sex-pregnancy/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thenational.scot/news/18337483.coronavirus-fm-asked->

[advice-sex-pregnancy/](#)

<sup>9</sup> <https://onlinedoctor.superdrug.com/contraceptive-pill-start1.html>