



OTC red-flag quick reference

Symptoms and contexts where an OTC consultation should become a referral. Always involve the responsible pharmacist when any red flag is present.

Headache <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sudden onset / 'worst headache ever' (thunderclap)• With fever, stiff neck, photophobia, non-blanching rash• After head injury, or with new neurological signs (visual changes, weakness, speech changes, confusion)• In pregnancy, especially with visual disturbance or BP concerns• Daily headache for >15 days/month - medication overuse	Cough / respiratory <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Blood-stained sputum (haemoptysis)• Persistent cough >3 weeks with no clear cause• Associated unexplained weight loss, night sweats, fever• Breathlessness at rest, chest pain, ankle swelling• Wheeze in a child without prior asthma diagnosis	GI / abdominal <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Blood in vomit (haematemesis) or stools (fresh or melaena)• Sudden severe abdominal pain• Persistent vomiting (>24-48h) or dehydration signs• Jaundice, dark urine, pale stools• Unintentional weight loss• Difficulty swallowing (dysphagia)
Skin <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Non-blanching rash (glass test)• Rapidly spreading rash with systemic symptoms• Suspected anaphylaxis• Pigmented lesion changing in size, shape, colour, or bleeding	Pain <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chest pain on exertion or at rest• Severe back pain with neurological signs, fever, or bladder/bowel changes• Progressive pain not responding to OTC analgesia• Pain with red, swollen, hot, painful calf (DVT risk)	Mental health <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Suicidal ideation or self-harm thoughts• Acute psychosis, severe depression, mania• Significant deterioration in a previously stable patient
Eye <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sudden vision loss or visual disturbance• Severe eye pain, especially with red eye• Eye injury, foreign body, or chemical exposure• Halos around lights with eye pain (possible acute glaucoma)	Babies and children under 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Any unwell baby under 3 months - low threshold to refer to GP/A&E;• Reduced wet nappies, prolonged crying, lethargy• Difficulty breathing, grunting, chest indrawing• Fever in babies under 3 months	Pregnant / breastfeeding <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Any new symptom in pregnancy where OTC suitability is unclear• Bleeding, severe abdominal pain, reduced fetal movement• Always check BNF / specialist source before recommending
Older adults / complex patients <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Multiple long-term conditions, polypharmacy, frailty• Falls or sudden mobility/confusion change• Renal or hepatic impairment affecting drug choice		

If in doubt, refer. A one-minute pharmacist chat is always better than missing something serious. Document your decision either way. — **Practise spotting red flags with AI patients at ppets.co.uk**