

Medical and paramedical care in the Netherlands

Medical and paramedical care for expats in Amstelveen region



General practitioner Kronenburg

Your GP for Uilenstede, Kronenburg, Middenhoven and surrounding areas

Contents

Medical care in the Netherlands.....	2
Youth healthcare services	10
Use of medication (including antibiotics) in the Netherlands	11
A child with a fever	15
A medical statement from a doctor.....	19
High blood pressure (hypertension) and high cholesterol	20
Children's diseases with a rash	23

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Medical care in the Netherlands

The role of the general practitioner

The general practitioner (GP), called *huisarts* in Dutch, is your first contact regarding medical issues in the Netherlands. The GP has a central role in the health care system. The role of a GP (in the UK and some other countries also called a family doctor) is probably different from what you are used to in your home country. The GP is your first point of contact for questions about your *physical* and *mental* health and can treat a lot of conditions, including *-but not limited to-* gynecological, dermatological, surgical, cardiac and internal diseases. The GP also performs minor surgical procedures. It is normal for children to be seen by a GP. In the Netherlands, pediatricians generally only see children with special needs or special conditions.

A GP is a healthcare specialist who has received three or more years of specialist training *after* a general 6-year medical education. A GP is required by law to regularly update his or her skills and re-register every 5 years. A GP is trained to determine when you need to be seen by another healthcare specialist. Therefore, your GP also serves as your link to most other services, such as other medical specialists or hospitalization if necessary. You cannot visit a medical specialist in the hospital without a referral from your GP. Sometimes a referral from your GP is also obliged for paramedical services.

In general, the GP writes a referral note for other medical services and specialists. However, there are some exceptions to this rule. The GP does not provide physiotherapy, perinatal care (obstetric and maternity care) and dental care and in most cases a referral note to these health services is not required. One can visit a dentist, physiotherapist and/ or midwife without intervention of a GP.

Contact with your general practitioner

The GP is your first point of contact for most your health questions. You should always call the GP office to make an appointment prior to consultation. There are no walk-in consultation hours. Consultation hours are organized at Huisarts Kronenburg (Uilenstede 512-A, Amstelveen) and Huisarts Middenhoven (Doctor Willem Dreesweg 2, Amstelveen) When you call to make an appointment, the assistants will let you know at which location you're expected for your appointment. Make sure you are in the right place at the right time!

When you call the GP's office to make an appointment, the assistant will ask you questions in order to determine how serious your situation is and to check whether you need to be seen by a GP or a practice nurse (in Dutch 'praktijkondersteuner'). The assistant will help you and the GP prepare for the appointment. He/ she may suggest alternatives for an in-person appointment at the GP practice, such as a consultation by telephone. Depending on your symptoms, the assistant will see if you can come the same day or a few days later. The GP's assistant is a medical professional and has a duty of confidentiality.

A GP assistant is professionally trained to provide advice on a wide variety of ailments and illnesses. He or she can also discuss laboratory or test results with the patient (after the GP has evaluated them). The

GP assistant is fully qualified and trained to carry out a variety of treatments and tests for patients, either independently or under the doctor's orders. Treatments and tests that the GP assistant can carry out include cervical smear tests, urine tests, blood pressure checks, injections, glucose testing and earwax removal. Under the direction of the GP they are trained to remove stitches, treat wounds and warts, and many other treatments and tests as recommended by the doctor.. The assistant is also bound by medical confidentiality!

Always make an appointment by phone! The phone lines will be answered from Monday till Fridays from 08:00 till 17:00 (break times are between 10:00-10:30 and 12:30-13:30).

- You can contact our practice by phone number **020 262 9897**. Note that this phone number will be answered in Dutch & English only!
- Our Ukrainian patients can contact our practice also by phone number **0850 4807 18**. You will get Ukrainian speaking assistants on the phone, who work for the general practitioner.
- In case of a non-life-threatening but urgent medical matter, you can bypass the waiting line by pressing nine in the selection menu. Note: deliberate abuse is dealt with harshly!

Consultation hours are at varying times and are held at two different locations:

- Kronenburg, Uilenstede 512A, 1183DE Amstelveen
Opened Monday till Fridays from 8:00 till 17:00.
Closed between 12:30-13:30 but available for only urgent medical matters by telephone.
- Middenhoven, Doctor Willem Dreesweg 2, 1185VB Amstelveen
Opened at limited times and dates

A consultation with a GP generally takes 10-15 minutes and takes place during regular office hours. During a consultation with the GP there is in general only time to address a single medical issue! If you think you need more time with the doctor, because you have more than one medical issue, you can discuss this with the GP's assistant and she will find a solution how to deal with this. If necessary (and only in exceptional circumstances and in consultation with the GP), he or she will schedule a 20 or 30-minute appointment. For Ukrainian refugees a Ukrainian-/ Russian-speaking assistant will generally be present at the consultation with your GP.

In case of emergency

Life-threatening emergency

In case of a life-threatening emergency, call **112**. This number is available 24 hours a day and will give you access to all emergency services: ambulance, police and fire brigade. In a medical emergency, you will also be instructed what to do until the ambulance arrives.

Urgent medical matters during office hours

For other, non-life-threatening, medical emergencies during office hours, always first call your GP. You will usually speak to the GP assistant first, and then the GP if necessary. If you need to go to hospital, the GP will call the ambulance and the specialist at the hospital who will take over your medical care.

Urgent medical matters during evenings, nights and weekends: out-of-hours service

When the GP practice is closed, you can call the out-of-hours service for urgent medical matters. The out-of-hours service ('huisartsenpost' in Dutch, abbreviated HAP) is a central office where GPs are available on call. You can make use of the out-of-hours GP service if your complaints are urgent and cannot wait until the next day/ weekday when your own GP is available again. All patients of 'Huisarts Kronenburg', including Ukrainian refugees, can make use of:

- Huisartsenpost Amstelland – Laan van de Helende Meesters 8, 1186 AM Amstelveen
Always call before visiting: **020 456 2000**. They can ask for your social security number (BSN) when calling.

All general practitioners and assistants of the out-of-hours GP service can speak both Dutch and English. Are you not able to speak English? Ask someone who can help you to make an appointment. It is preferable that you bring someone with you who can be the interpreter (i.e. who can translate for you).

A visit to the hospital

When the GP considers it is necessary and medically indicated (i.e. he/she does not have the knowledge, expertise and/or diagnostic or therapeutic options at his disposal), the GP can refer you to the hospital. He will write a referral note, which will be sent digitally to the relevant department of the hospital. You cannot visit a medical specialist in the hospital without a referral note from your GP. The referral note contains all relevant information regarding your complaints or illnesses for which you were sent to the specialist. This includes information about your medical past and medication. The specialist decides when you can be seen at the outpatient clinic. He takes into account the nuisance experienced by the patient and the medical urgency of the complaints. You will be informed by the hospital of date and time of your appointment. In most cases you will receive a letter at your home address, but in some cases they will contact you by telephone. If you do not hear from them, it is advisable to contact the relevant department yourself. Volunteers of Vluchtelingenwerk can help you making the appointment. In some cases the GP will send you directly to the emergency department of the hospital for diagnostic tests and treatment on the same day. The GP of Huisarts Kronenburg will refer you in general to:

- Ziekenhuis Amstelland – Laan van de Helende Meesters 8, 1186 AM Amstelveen
All departments can be reached via the central number: **020 755 7000**
Direct telephone number of the Radiology department: **020 755 7078**
They can ask for your social security number (BSN) when calling.

If you are referred to the Amstelland hospital for an X-ray image, you do not need to make an appointment. You can go there every working day between 08:30 and 16:30 (walk-in hours). This does not apply for ultrasound, CT-scan or MRI tests; you still need to make an appointment.

The hospital will not always have an interpreter available and/or be able to arrange an interpreter on the telephone. In order to help you properly, it is important to speak Dutch or English. If you do not speak Dutch or English it is most strongly advised to bring a friend or relative who can be the interpreter.

Prescription of medication

Most medication is not freely available at the pharmacy and requires a prescription from your GP (or hospital specialist) only after a personal consultation. However, after a consultation, it is possible that you will receive a diagnosis but no medication. Medication may have harmful side effects. A wait-and-see approach is often suitable for minor illnesses such as a sore throat or a common cold. Compared to what you may be used to, all doctors in the Netherlands (both GP's and hospital specialists) are less likely to prescribe antibiotics and other medication.

You can choose your own pharmacy. If you have chosen your pharmacy, it is important that this is also recorded in your GP's patient records. The assistant will help you with that.

Every pharmacy employs a pharmacist. He can give elaborate advice about medication and how to use it. There are several pharmacies in Amstelveen region, among which are:

- Apotheek Boots Zwaansvliet – Zwaansvliet 5, 1081AP Amsterdam – 088 104 0557
- Apotheek Randwijck – Hoeksewaard 147-C, 1181CD Amstelveen – 020 303 4700
- Apotheek Kostverlorenhof – Kostverlorenhof 149, 1183 HK Amstelveen – 020 345 4177
- Apotheek Zonnestein – Van Heuven Goedhartlaan 933A, 1181LD Amstelveen – 020 643 2892

Only a limited number of medicines are available over the counter without a prescription from a GP. Some can be sold everywhere (supermarkets), but in some cases sale is limited to a drugstore or pharmacy. As with all medication, freely available medication can also have side effects and the risk of overdosing. The most important medicines, which are freely available, are for pain relief. Paracetamol (acetaminophen) is the most sold freely available medicine; in an appropriate dosage, it is generally considered to be safe and with a limited risk of side effects.

The correct dosage and instructions on how to use the medication are always noted on the packaging or in the package leaflet (in Dutch 'bijsluiter'). Note that the dosage of many medicines is different for children and may be dependent on a specific age and/ or weight. This equally applies to freely available medication.

If you need medication at out-of-office hours you can go to:

- Dienstapothek Amstelland (next to the emergency department of the Amstelland hospital)
Address: Laan van de Helende Meesters 8, 1186AM Amstelveen
Opening hours: Mondays till Fridays from 17:30 till 23:00, Weekends from 08:30 till 23:00
- Apotheek OLVG, location West
Address: Jan Tooropstraat 164, 1061 AE Amsterdam (inside the hospital)
Opening hours: 24/7

Pregnancy

As soon as you know you are pregnant, it is important to make an appointment with a midwife; all pregnant women in the Netherlands should register with a midwife! The Dutch word for midwife is 'verloskundige'. They provide pregnancy counseling in the Netherlands and they provide guidance throughout both pregnancy as well as delivery. Your midwife will monitor the course of your pregnancy at regular intervals. Usually, you will be invited for a check-up every four weeks during the first half of

the pregnancy. The frequency then increases to weekly appointments as the due date approaches. However, this is only a general indication: more or fewer appointments may be scheduled depending on your personal situation. If you have a normal pregnancy, you may choose where you want to give birth. Delivering at home or in hospital are both considered safe options.

If medical complications should arise, the gynecologist will take over your care and you will deliver in hospital. You cannot visit a gynecologist directly without a referral from a GP or midwife! It is also strongly advised to inform your GP about your pregnancy immediately.

In the days after the birth of your child, there is help at home from maternity Care (in Dutch called 'kraamzorg'). You must arrange maternity care in advance. The midwife can help you with this. After giving birth, you will need to register your child at the local municipality, with the department of municipal population affairs. You must do this within three days of the birth of your child.

You are free to choose your midwife. In Amstelveen, there are several midwife practices, among which

- Verloskundige praktijk Amstelveen/Buitenveldert
Several locations (among which Molenweg 12a Amstelveen & Kamillelaan 1h in Amstelveen)
For appointments call on Monday till Fridays from 9AM till 5PM: +31 20 647 0474
For emergency only: 06 1424 3550 (if no hearing 06 8370 0313)
- Helende meesters verloskundigen
Several locations (among which Laan van de Helende Meesters 431 Amstelveen and Van Heuven Goedhartlaan 933 Amstelveen)
For appointments call on Monday till Fridays from 9AM till 5PM: +31 20 645 8018
For emergency only: 06 5430 0190 (if no hearing 06 5175 2876)

Laboratory testing

In some cases, your GP will need to perform additional laboratory tests to make a diagnosis or to determine an effective and safe treatment. This may include a tailored blood test or a test regarding other bodily fluids and waste samples like urine, feces or sperm. The GP of *Huisarts Kronenburg* will in most cases refer you to either of these two locations of *RHMDC*:

- RHMDC, location Medisch Centrum Zwaansvliet (without appointment)
Address: Zwaansvliet 5, 1081AP Amsterdam
Open Mondays and Wednesdays till Fridays from 09:30 till 12:00
- RHMDC, location Huisartsenpraktijk Melkweg (without appointment)
- Address: Melkweg 2, 1188LB Amstelveen (near GP office Kronenburg)
- RHMDC, location Makroon Medisch Centrum (by appointment only)
Address: Nieuwe passeerdersstraat 8, 1016XP Amsterdam
Open Mondays and Wednesdays till Fridays from 08:00 till 16:00

In some rare cases the GP will refer you to another organization called Atalmedial:

- Laboratorium Atalmedial, location Medisch Centrum Randwijck (by appointment only)
Address: Hoeksewaard 147 a – d, 1181CD Amstelveen

Psychological care

If you have mental health issues, your GP is the starting point for seeking professional help. Your GP can provide treatment or refer you to other mental health care professionals, depending on the nature of your problems and their complexity. It can be helpful to talk about these topics with your friends and relatives, but in some cases it may be desirable to seek professional help in time. There are several options:

- Your general practitioner (and POH-GGZ, i.e. psychologist) from Huisarts Kronenburg
A Dutch general practitioner is trained to help patients with psychosomatic or psychiatric complaints. He can prescribe medication, like anti-depressants, for more serious complaints. He serves as your link to other mental health care services and professionals. In some cases, he can perform the complete treatment himself, but in general, he will refer you (for a part of the treatment) to the POH-GGZ. A POH-GGZ is a highly trained mental health care professional who can treat a variety of psychosomatic and psychiatric complaints. Huisarts Kronenburg enlists an English speaking POH-GGZ professional. If necessary and desired, a Ukrainian interpreter who can translate for you can be present.
- A psychotherapist/ psychiatrist
For more serious psychosomatic or psychiatric complaints help from a psychotherapist or psychiatrist might be desirable. Depending on the nature of the complaints, help is available from various institutions and professionals. A referral by your GP is always obligated. Most Dutch mental health care professionals are English speaking. In some cases, an interpreter can be arranged, but that is never guaranteed; the institution itself arranges this. There is a Ukrainian born, Ukrainian/ Russian speaking 'GGZ-psycholoog' (psychotherapist) who helps Ukrainian refugees in Amstelveen region, but there is an extremely long waiting list.

Please note that waiting lists for various mental health care institutions and professionals can be very long in the Netherlands; this can range from several months to well over a year. In many cases your GP will advise you to start treatment with the POH-GGZ, sometimes also to bridge the waiting list at an external organization.

Consultation and treatment by the POH-GGZ falls within 1st-line care. There are no costs associated with this if you have a Dutch health insurance policy. In the Netherlands, health insurance covers all or part of the costs of primary and secondary mental health care (the so called 'basic GGZ' and 'specialized GGZ'). The exact conditions depend on your insurer and the policy you have, so you should check your policy or contact your insurer for more information.

Dental care

In the Netherlands, anyone can visit and register at a dental practice of their own choice. In some cases, however, dental practices are closed to new registrations. There is no need for a referral by a general practitioner. Every dental practice employs a dentist. For more complex treatments a dentist might make a referral to the oral surgeon in the hospital.

The cost for dental and oral care are reimbursed only to a limited extent for adults. Dental and oral care is only covered for acute pain complaints (up to a maximum of €250). Your dental practice can inform you about which specific treatments are covered. For children the cost of dental care is covered in most

cases. One of the exceptions where the costs for dental care are not reimbursed for children is the orthodontist (braces dentist). There are several dental practices in Amstelveen region, among which are:

- Tandartspraktijk Kronenburg – Laan van Kronenburg 12, 1183AS Amstelveen – 020 811 9955
- Randwijck Mondzorgpraktijk – Eikenrodelaan 99HS, 1181DG Amstelveen – 020 889 0605
- Mondzorg Zonnestein – Van Heuven Goedhartlaan 933, 1181LD Amstelveen - 0615205086

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy, also called physical therapy, is often an important part of the treatment (and diagnosis) of complaints of the musculoskeletal system of humans. It addresses illnesses and injuries that limit a person's abilities to move and perform functional activities in their daily lives. In some cases, your general practitioner will advise you to visit a physiotherapist as part of its treatment. In most cases, there is no need for a referral by a general practitioner. Anyone can visit a physiotherapist of their own choice. You only need a referral note when it involves certain specific/ chronic conditions. Note that the cost for physiotherapy are not reimbursed most cases and you will have to pay for it yourself. There are many physiotherapy practices in Amstelveen region, among which are:

- Fysiotherapie Zwaansvliet – Zwaansvliet 4, 1081AP Amsterdam – 020 644 0070
- Fysiotherapie MC Randwijk - Hoeksewaard 147 B, 1181 CD Amstelveen – 020 641 4543

Reimbursement for the cost of medical and mental health care

Every person who lives or works in the Netherlands is legally obliged to take out standard health insurance to cover the cost of, for example, consulting a general practitioner, hospital treatment and prescription medication. You may also opt to take out additional insurance to cover costs not included in the standard package. Anyone who is obligated to take out Dutch health insurance under the Health Insurance Act, must enroll with a health insurer to cover medical expenses within four months of arrival in the Netherlands. The Dutch healthcare system is based on the principle of social solidarity. Therefore anyone, healthy or not, must contribute to the medical expenses of those who are ill.

The Dutch health insurance offers 2 packages:

- Standard package. The government decides on the cover provided by the standard package. All insurers offer the same standard package. Healthcare insurers are obliged to accept anyone who applies for the standard insurance package and must charge all policyholders the same premium, regardless of their age or state of health.
- Not all health care is covered by the standard package. You can opt to take out additional insurance to cover, for example, physiotherapy or dental care. Additional insurance is not obligatory and you are not obliged to take out the standard package and additional insurance with the same insurance company. Insurance companies are not obliged to accept everyone who applies for additional insurance. An insurance company can refuse to accept you as a client or can ask you about your health before accepting you.

The Dutch standard package includes all necessary and emergency care. The standard package includes the following medical services:

- A consultation with a general practitioner and hospital specialist

- All care for pregnant women provided by a midwife (in Dutch 'verloskundige'). This also includes maternity care (in Dutch 'Kraamzorg').
- Youth health care services (see below).
- Hospital admissions, surgery and emergency care services
- Laboratory testing (blood, urine, feces) and other diagnostic services (X-ray imaging, ultrasound examinations, et cetera).
- Mental health care (with many restrictions)
- Most medical prescriptions at the pharmacy

→ Besides the monthly premium there is a mandatory policy excess (in Dutch 'eigen risico'). The policy excess concerns healthcare costs that are not reimbursed. The government determined that the excess for 2024 amounts to € 385,-. Medical costs that exceed this sum and are covered by your health insurance will be paid by the insure

→ Children under 18 insured free of charge for standard package. Children under the age of 18 must have health insurance but do not pay premiums for the standard package. Parents must register their child with an insurance company within four months of its birth. A policy excess ('eigen risico') does not apply to children.

→ Medical care provided by your GP will not be deducted from your policy excess. But some medical treatments are deducted from the policy excess, such as a blood test.

→ Sometimes you have to pay a personal contribution for a medicine. This is because similar medications can differ in price. The government then determines a maximum reimbursement from the standard package. If the price of a medicine exceeds this reimbursement, you must pay extra. That is your own contribution (in Dutch 'eigen bijdrage'). Until December 31, 2024, this personal contribution is up to a maximum of € 250 per person per year.

→ Note that limitations and additional requirements might apply. For example; for a visit to a hospital specialist a referral by a general practitioner is required!

→ The cost for dental care and physiotherapy are reimbursed only to a limited extent!

→ For admission to a nursing home or revalidation facility, care at home by a nurse and medical aids (such as a wheelchair), different regulations apply.

→ Medical (and paramedical) care for Ukrainian refugees with a social security number (BSN) is provided and reimbursed according to a regulation called RMO. Almost all Ukrainian refugees registered with the municipality of Amstelveen have a social security number (BSN). This regulation describes care to which Ukrainian refugees are entitled. Ukrainian refugees from Amstelveen without a social security number (BSN) and refugees from other countries fall under a different regulation called RMA.

Youth healthcare services

Youth health care (0 -18 years)

In the Netherlands, the Youth Health Care (JGZ) is responsible for preventive care for children. Its activities are carried out in all municipalities via the Municipal health services (GGD) or JGZ teams. They employ youth doctors, nurse specialists and youth nurses. You can go there for free.

What does JGZ do?

Youth health care (JGZ) advises on the growth and healthy and safe development of children. The JGZ gets acquainted with all children in the Netherlands, often already during pregnancy. This is done by a home visit or a visit at the consultation office. By talking to you and your child, both the parents as well as the JGZ professional gets an idea of how your child is doing. The JGZ professional investigates how your child is doing physically, cognitively and psychosocially. They offer information and guidance if necessary. The JGZ can also refer you to other healthcare professionals if needed, like a pediatrician.

Vaccination

The JGZ provides vaccinations according to the *National Immunization Programme* (Rijksvaccinatieprogramma). See also https://rijksvaccinatieprogramma.nl/sites/default/files/2022-07/74301_RIVM_014036_Folder_RVP_OEKRAIENS_TG_PDFa.pdf for more information (in Ukrainian). These vaccinations protect against 12 serious infectious diseases, just like in Ukraine. The JGZ also performs a hearing test at newborn children, keeps track of growth, health and development of children up to the age of 18.

Newborns

A hearing test is performed for newborns residing in the Netherlands in the first two weeks after birth. In the first week children are also tested for congenital disorders. This is performed by drawing some blood from the child's heel. This test is known as the heel prick (hielprik) or newborn blood spot screening. This also applies to newborns who have arrived from Ukraine or are born here and stay here (temporarily or otherwise).

Questions and registration

Children registered with the municipality of Amstelveen are automatically registered with the GGD Amsterdam. It is also possible to ask questions about the growth and development of your child or book an appointment by e-mail or by phone (020-5555964):

- Questions for children > 4 years old: SGZ4-19Amstelland@ggd.amsterdam.nl
- Questions for children ≤ 4 years old: JGZAmstelveenZonnestein@ggd.amsterdam.nl

Use of medication (including antibiotics) in the Netherlands

Prescription of medication

Compared to what you may be used to, doctors in the Netherlands are less likely to prescribe antibiotics and other medication. Most medication is not freely available at the pharmacy and requires a prescription from your GP after a personal consultation. However, after a consultation, it is possible that you will receive a diagnosis but no medication. Medication may have harmful side effects. A wait-and-see approach is often suitable for minor illnesses such as a sore throat or a common cold.

Antibiotics

You may find that antibiotics in particular are prescribed less in the Netherlands. Antibiotics are medications used to treat infections caused by bacteria. But antibiotics do not work for all infections. The cause of the infection is important:

- Most infections are caused by a virus. For example, a cold or flu.
- Other infections are caused by bacteria. For example, a bladder infection, lung infection (pneumonia) and some sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- Some infections start with a virus, but are then taken over by bacteria. This can happen in the case of infections of the throat, the lungs, the middle ear or the eye. In that case, the infection gets worse, and often fever increases. A fever can also come back after a few fever-free days.

How antibiotics work

Antibiotics work very well against infections caused by bacteria. They kill the bacteria or slow their growth. Antibiotics do not work against infections caused by viruses. Therefore, a doctor won't prescribe antibiotics for a common cold or flu. Penicillin is a well-known antibiotic, but there are many other types. Each type of antibiotic works against other bacteria.

Disadvantages of antibiotics

Antibiotics can have side effects

Antibiotics can have side effect. The most frequent ones are nausea, diarrhea or an itchy rash (red spots or blotches) on the skin.

Antibiotics also kill the 'good' bacteria

A disadvantage of antibiotics is that they also work against the bacteria we need. For example, bacteria in our gut, which help us digest our food. When antibiotics also kill these 'good' bacteria, other bacteria or fungi sometimes have the chance to grow.

Bacteria can become insensitive (resistant)

If the same antibiotic is regularly used against certain bacteria, these bacteria can become insensitive (resistant) to the antibiotic. The bacteria are then no longer sensitive to that antibiotic. If you get an infection with such resistant bacteria, the antibiotics won't help and you can become very ill. Sometimes other antibiotics will still work.

Your GP will carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of prescribing antibiotics in each medical situation.

Freely available medication (without a prescription)

Only a limited number of medicines available over the counter *without* a prescription from a GP or specialist. Some can be sold everywhere (supermarkets), but in some cases the sale is limited to a drugstore or pharmacy. As with all medication, freely available medication can also have side effects and the risk over overdose. It is important to take the correct dosage. The correct dosage is always noted on the packaging or in the package leaflet (bijsluiter). Note that the dosage of many medicines is different for children and may be dependent on a specific age and/ or weight. This equally applies to freely available medication.

Paracetamol

The most important medicines, which are freely available, are for pain relief. Paracetamol (acetaminophen) is the most sold freely available medicine; in an appropriate dosage, it is generally considered to be safe and with a limited risk of side effects.

Precautions

Other freely available medicines are often associated with a greater risk of side effects and/ or side effects that are more serious. In some cases the medicines can have dangerous interactions with other medicines. Therefore, it is very important to follow instructions, which can be found in the package leaflet (bijsluiter) very closely. If questions about medication remain unsolved, we advise you to consult a physician (i.e. your GP).

If you choose to use freely available medication, pay specific attention to the instructions if

- You have a serious disease of your kidneys or liver.
- You have other diseases such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease.
- You have a disease that makes you more prone to side effects.
- You are also taking other medicines. Some medicines cannot not be taken together.
- You fall within a certain age category, such as a child or an elderly person.
- You are a woman who is pregnant or intends to become pregnant or who is breast-feeding.

You can usually only use medicines without a prescription for a limited time. There are a number of risks if you take a drug for too long:

- You become addicted or used to the drug.
- The medicine will work less well for you.
- You will experience side effects.
- The complaints do get less if you use the medicine, but the medicine does not solve the real cause of your complaint. Other treatment may be required.

Sleeping pills

You may also find that sleeping pills are rarely prescribed in the Netherlands. They are only prescribed in specific situations. Sleeping pills only work if you take them for a short time. However, the cause of the insomnia does not disappear. With long-term use, there is a significant risk of habituation and addiction. In addition, sleeping pills are associated with serious side effects and risks. Sleep advice (sleep hygiene) and other treatments work better and tackle the cause most often.

What are sleeping pills?

Sleeping pills are medicines that temporarily help you fall asleep or stay asleep. The most commonly used sleeping pills are benzodiazepines.

How do sleeping pills work?

- Sleeping pills slow down your nervous system: you become lethargic and sleepy.
- Sleeping pills have a calming effect: you become calmer and feel less anxious.
- Sleeping pills cause your muscles to relax.

Some sleeping pills have a short effect and help you fall asleep. Examples are temazepam and zolpidem. Other sleeping pills work longer and help you sleep through the night. Examples include diazepam, lorazepam, and oxazepam. Over time, sleeping pills stop working. Therefore, do not use sleeping pills for longer than 2 weeks. If you use them for a longer period of time, you can become addicted.

When can sleeping pills help?

A sedative can help you sleep a little better for one or more days. However, a sleeping aid also has many disadvantages. It is wise to think it through carefully first. Only in the following situations can you choose to temporarily use a sleeping aid:

- A sudden problem or serious event makes you temporarily unable to sleep. As a result, you cannot do the things you normally do during the day, such as working, studying or taking care of your children. This sometimes occurs, for example, after a dismissal or after the death of a partner.
- You have been sleeping too short for a long time. Sleep advice is not enough. This prevents you from functioning during daytime.

Disadvantages and side effects of sleeping pills

- Sleeping pills work temporarily. The cause of the insomnia does not disappear.
- You can quickly get used to sleeping pills. If you use them for more than 2 weeks, they don't work as good as before. You need more sleeping pills to sleep.
- It gets harder to stop. You may have withdrawal symptoms if you stop taking it. Some people get addicted.
- Sleeping pills stay in your blood longer than necessary, even 2 days. This causes:
 - drowsiness during the day
 - You respond quickly. You are less able to focus. You often do not notice it yourself.
 - This increases the risk of an accident. For example in traffic. Or when operating machines at work.

- Your memory works less well. You know very little about the short period of time you have a sleeping pill.
- Are you a bit older? Then you are more likely to fall at night from daytime. For example, you could break a hip.
- Other side effects include:
 - breathing (this can be dangerous with sleep apnea or lung problems)
 - headache
 - to be gloomy
 - being dizzy
 - little interest in things
 - amnesia
 - being tired
 - less in the mood for love
 - more likely to snore
- Do you also use other sleeping pills? Or do you take them together with alcohol, drugs or tranquilizers? Then these side effects are often worse and combining sleeping pills with alcohol, drugs or tranquilizer can be dangerous

Advice if you want to use a sleeping aid

- Talk to your doctor about your sleeping problems first. To solve sleeping problems, you first need to know what caused the problem. It often helps to change certain (sleeping) habits. You can discuss the pros and cons of a sleeping pill with your doctor. After that, you can decide to use a sleeping aid for one or several days.
- Only use sleeping pills for a few days. In any case, do not use sleeping pills for longer than 2 weeks.
- You may generally not participate in traffic with sleeping pills.
- Do not take sleeping pills with other drugs that make you feel drowsy (certain medicines, alcohol and/ or drugs).
- Are you pregnant or are you breastfeeding? Do not take a sleeping pill. The sedative goes directly to the child via the blood or breast milk.
- Don't use valerian and melatonin as sleeping pills. Research shows that valerian does not help against insomnia. Melatonin is not a sleeping pill, but it can only help you shift day-and-night-rhythm.

What are withdrawal symptoms?

When you stop taking sleeping pills, you may find that in the beginning sleeping is usually extra difficult. You may temporarily experience symptoms, like palpitations, restlessness, anxiety, nightmares, headache, sweating, shivering, dizziness and many more. These symptoms are called withdrawal symptoms. This gives you the idea that you need the sleeping pills. This is not the case. It only shows that you have become dependent on the drug. So do not give in to your need for a sleeping pill. If you persevere now, things will get better later. The symptoms disappear within 2 to 3 weeks.

A child with a fever

In brief

- A fever is a body temperature of 38 degrees Celsius or higher.
- Fever is common in children, especially in children less than 5 years old.
- Fever itself is not a cause for concern. Do always watch your child for other symptoms.
- Reducing the fever is not necessary. Only give paracetamol (acetaminophen) in appropriate dosage (related to age and weight) if the fever is accompanied by pain.
- Antibiotics usually are not necessary for fever.
- Call your general practitioner immediately if your child has a fever and:
 - is less than 3 months old (and the fever is not due to a vaccination)
 - has a heart or lung disease or diabetes mellitus
 - uses medication that weakens the immune system
 - has a weaker immune system, such as a child with Down's syndrome
 - has missed a vaccination at the well-baby clinic (consultatiebureau)
- If your child has a fever, make sure to watch for other symptoms. Check on your child regularly.
 - Is your child behaving differently than usual?
 - Is your child drowsy, having trouble breathing or crying inconsolably? Or does your child look grey or ashen?
 - Does your child have red spots that do not go away when you press on them?
 - Is your child vomiting repeatedly (a few times an hour)?
 - Is your child refusing to drink or not peeing (urinating) enough?
 - Is your child getting sicker or getting worse?
- These are warning signs. Phone your general practitioner immediately.
- Dutch healthcare practices in general may differ from what you are used to in your home country (see for information about the Dutch Healthcare system gpinfo.nl)

Fever in a child

Fever is common in children, especially in children less than 5 years old. Your child has a fever if their body temperature is 38 degrees Celsius or higher.

How to take your child's temperature

Take the temperature rectally (in the bottom). This is the most accurate method. An ear thermometer is less accurate and should not be used for children less than 3 months old. Taking the temperature once a day is enough for a child who is not very sick. You do not have to take your child's temperature if they don't feel sick (anymore).

How high?

Body temperature always rises a little in the evening, also in children with a fever. During an infection, the body temperature can increase up to 40 or 41 degrees Celsius. That is nothing to worry about. Fever is not harmful to the body or the brain. As long as the body can get rid of the heat, the temperature rarely rises above 41 degrees. The temperature itself doesn't say much about the severity of the illness.

Do watch for other symptoms to see if your child is very sick. It is not necessary to keep taking your child's temperature.

How long?

The fever can last several days. How long the fever lasts doesn't say much about the severity of the illness. Once the body has overcome the infection, the temperature drops again.

How does fever develop in children?

Fever is a normal reaction of the body to a viral or bacterial infection. Fever probably helps fight the infection. At a higher temperature, the body produces more antibodies against viruses and bacteria.

Fever is usually caused by a harmless viral infection. For example, a cold with a sore throat and a cough. Fever can also be caused by a bacterial infection. Sometimes fever can also be a sign of a serious infection. For example, pneumonia or meningitis. But that is much less common.

Fever can also develop after vaccination at the well baby clinic. The body reacts to this by producing antibodies (just like it does for an infection). If your child later comes into contact with the real bacteria or virus, they are prepared for it and will not get sick. And that's precisely the purpose of the vaccination. Most vaccines can cause fever in the first 2 days. The MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine (BMR in Dutch) sometimes causes fever after 5 to 12 days.

What can you do yourself if your child has a fever?

Fever itself is not a cause for concern. Do always watch your child for other symptoms.

- Give your child extra drinks. Or an ice lolly. The fever and sweating can cause your child to lose a lot of fluids. Eating is less important. Don't force your child to eat.
- Make sure your child gets enough rest. They don't have to stay in bed, and can also go outside.
- The body needs to be able to lose the heat. So dress your child in thin, loose-fitting clothes. In bed, a sheet is often enough. If your child is cold or shivering, you can cover them with a blanket for a little while'. Doctors do not recommend sponging the skin with cold water or placing a cold wet cloth (compress) on the skin to cool down.
- Make sure there is a parent (or other adult) at home who regularly checks on your child.
- Is your child playing, laughing, looking and reacting normally? Is your child breathing calmly and regularly? Does your child have a healthy skin colour? Is your child drinking and peeing normally? Then your child probably isn't very sick.
- Sometimes a child with a fever can become sicker quickly. In that case, it is important that someone notices this. So also keep watching your child for other symptoms. This way you will soon notice if your child gets sicker. Call your general practitioner immediately if your child has one or more of these symptoms:
 - Your child becomes drowsy.
 - Your child is breathing faster or wheezing.
 - Your child's lips turn blue or their face turns pale and grey or ashen.
 - Your child develops red spots that do not go away when you press on them.
 - Your child is not peeing or drinking enough.
 - Your child is crying inconsolably.

- Your child is acting differently than usual.
- Your child is getting worse and worse.

Febrile seizure (febrile convulsion)

Sometimes, children between 6 months and 6 years old with a fever can develop a febrile seizure. Your child becomes stiff and its arms and legs suddenly start shaking. This can understandably be frightening for you, but stay calm. Most of the time, a febrile seizure is not harmful. This is what you should do:

- Use a finger to make sure your child's mouth is empty.
- Place your child on its side.
- Make sure your child cannot fall or bump or hurt itself.
- Then phone your general practitioner immediately.

Only fever with no other symptoms?

Does your child only have a fever with no other symptoms, such as coughing, runny nose, earache or diarrhea? Then it could have a urinary tract infection (UTI). In this case, you should phone your general practitioner. Sometimes the doctor will ask you to collect your child's urine and bring it to the doctor's office. This can be difficult with young children. You can ask your GP for advice.

Medication for fever in children

Reducing the fever is not necessary

Parents often want to give medication to reduce the fever. This is not necessary and not useful. Fever is not a cause for concern. Fever probably helps to fight infection. Medication does not help reduce the chance of a febrile seizure either.

Only give paracetamol (acetaminophen) for fever with pain

Does your child feel very sick? Is your child in pain? Or drinking less than usual? Then you can give paracetamol. Your child will often feel a bit better after half an hour. This is because the paracetamol relieves the pain. Paracetamol usually also reduces the fever. If your child's fever does not drop, that is not a cause for concern. You only give paracetamol to relieve the pain and not to reduce the fever.

Children over 1 year old can be given ibuprofen (in appropriate dosage related to age and weight) for pain for a short period of time instead of paracetamol. Doctors recommend giving paracetamol, because they and parents have more experience with it. How much paracetamol (or ibuprofen) you can give depends on your child's age and weight. Read the instructions on the package carefully. Contact your general practitioner if the indicated dose does not relieve the pain enough. In the Netherlands paracetamol suppositories are widely available for children. A suppository is a small, torpedo-shaped medicine which is inserted into the back passage (rectum). Paracetamol Suppositories are used to treat pain in children from 1 to 5 years of age. They can be used in children who find it difficult to take paracetamol as tablets or syrup.

Antibiotics?

Antibiotics usually are not necessary for fever. Fever is often caused by a virus, and antibiotics are not effective against viruses. Antibiotics are effective against bacteria, but the body can often clear bacteria on its own. In that case, antibiotics are not necessary.

What happens next when a child has a fever?

The fever can last several days. Half of the children with fever still have a fever on the 4th day, and a quarter of the children still have a fever on the 7th day. The duration of the fever doesn't say much about the severity of the illness. Most viral infections go away on their own. Do keep watching for other symptoms. Even if you have taken your child to see your general practitioner. Sometimes a child with a fever can suddenly become sicker. The chance is small, but in that case you should call your general practitioner or out-of-hours service (huisartsenpost) immediately.

When to contact your general practitioner if your child has a fever

Contact your general practitioner or out-of-hours service immediately if your child has a fever and:

- is less than 3 months old (and the fever is not due to a vaccination)
- has a heart or lung disease
- has diabetes mellitus
- uses medication that weakens the immune system or has a weaker immune system due to Down's syndrome
- has been abroad (in a subtropical country) in the last 4 weeks.

These children are more likely to become very sick in case of an infection. The doctor will want to examine your child, even if they do not have any other symptoms yet.

Also contact your general practitioner:

- if your child has had a fever for 5 days
- or if your child has had a fever and has missed a vaccination at the well baby clinic. This is because of the risk of a serious childhood illness.

The following applies to all children with fever:

Contact your general practitioner or out-of-hours service immediately if your child has a fever and one of the following warning signs:

- drowsy or difficult to wake up;
- groaning or crying inconsolably;
- having trouble breathing or breathing differently (breathing faster, wheezing, breathing loudly and drooling, or not breathing for short periods of time);
- a pale grey (ashen) or blotchy skin colour or blue lips;
- red spots that do not go away when you press on them (on the trunk, arms, legs or the whites of the eyes or the inside of the eyelids);
- gets sicker in a short period of time (different to how you have seen your child sick before);
- gets sicker and vomits repeatedly (several times an hour; with or without diarrhoea);
- drinks a lot less than usual (less than half of what the child usually drinks);
- has not peed or had a wet nappy for half a day;
- arms and legs start shaking or has convulsions (febrile seizure);
- a swollen arm, leg or joint, which the child is unable to use properly;
- develops fever again after being fever-free for a few days.

A medical statement from a doctor

Your own general practitioner (from Huisarts Kronenburg) cannot issue a 'medical certificate' (also known as a doctor's certificate). In doing so, your doctor acted in accordance with the rules issued by the Royal Dutch Medical Association (KNMG), the professional organisation for physicians.

A medical certificate

A medical certificate is a written declaration that provides an assessment of you as a patient and your (medical) suitability or unsuitability for performing certain tasks. Examples include being able to work, drive a car, go to school, look after your children properly, travel or be entitled to a parking permit or adapted housing. These medical certificates may only be issued by an independent doctor, i.e. not your 'own' doctor. This independent doctor can reach their own opinion of your situation. If you give your consent, this doctor may also ask your own doctor(s) for extra information.

Why can't your doctor issue a medical certificate?

Your own doctor needs to be able to concentrate on your treatment. In order to do so, it is important to have a good relationship of trust with you. This relationship of trust may be adversely affected if your own doctor states an opinion that is unfavorable for you. It is necessary to avoid situations in which you and your doctor enter into conflict as a result. There must therefore be a clear boundary between the treatment and the assessment of whether you are eligible for certain facilities or services. This means that nothing will prevent you from giving your own doctor all the information required for your treatment. It also benefits you if the examination is conducted by a doctor who is familiar with the specific requirements for the allocation of the facility or service you are requesting. Your own doctor does not have all the knowledge required. This also makes it impossible for your own doctor to make a valid assessment.

How can you obtain a medical certificate?

1. You can check with the body that requires the medical certificate whether it is sufficient for you to provide your own statement about your state of health, possibly in the form of a questionnaire that you can complete yourself.
2. You can ask your own doctor to issue a copy of a specific part of your medical record that includes certain important facts about your state of health. For example, this may include the results of a walking test or vision test, etc. You can then send this to the body requesting a medical certificate.
3. If an assessment is required, you can turn to a doctor who specialises in the relevant field and who is not responsible for your treatment. This doctor may also ask your own doctor for factual information about your state of health and use this information in their assessment. This will only be possible with your consent.
4. You can ask the body that requires a medical certificate whether they can arrange an independent doctor for you.

High blood pressure (hypertension) and high cholesterol

In Brief

- Blood pressure is the pressure in your blood vessels.
- A blood pressure that is too high (hypertension) increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, such as a heart attack or stroke.
- Important rules to live by are; quit smoking, getting more exercise, a healthier diet and reducing stress.
- By following above lifestyle rules, the risk of cardiovascular disease can be reduced.
- Dutch healthcare practices in general may differ from what you're used to in your home country. Physicians treat the risk of cardiovascular disease following from a high blood pressure, not the elevated blood pressure itself.
- Medication to lower blood pressure is not always necessary.

What is normal and high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the pressure in your blood vessels. When your heart contracts, it pumps blood into your body. The pressure in your blood vessels is at its highest then. That's called systolic pressure. When your heart rests again, the pressure is lower. That's called diastolic pressure. Your blood pressure changes constantly during the day. When you run fast, your blood pressure is higher than when you sit quietly. Generally your blood pressure is also lower at night.

- To measure your blood pressure properly, you first need to sit quietly for at least 5 minutes. To find out whether you have a high blood pressure, we mainly look at the systolic pressure. More measurements are needed to tell if you really have high blood pressure; 2 or 3 measurements on the same day, and also on different days over several weeks/ months.
- If these measurements show that the average systolic pressure is 140 or higher, we call this high blood pressure. If you are over 70 years old, an average systolic pressure of less than 150 can in some cases also still be good (depending on your health condition and age).

Symptoms of a high blood pressure

You usually will not notice anything if you have high blood pressure. It usually does not cause any symptoms. Only with an extremely high blood pressure, you can be dizzy, have a blurred vision, a headache or vomit. In that case, you should consult a physician immediately.

What is the cause of my high blood pressure?

Usually no clear cause for high blood pressure can be found. The chance of high blood pressure gets slightly higher as you grow older. This is because the blood vessels get narrower or stiffer. This is called atherosclerosis. High blood pressure occurs more often in some families. A high blood pressure can also be caused by:

- being overweight
- smoking
- too much salt
- too much liquorice
- too much alcohol

- fatty foods
- certain medication, such as some painkillers (such as ibuprofen, naproxen, diclofenac) or corticosteroids (prednisone)
- taking the birth control pill

Smoking, fatty foods, alcohol and being overweight can make your blood vessels narrower and stiffer. This can cause the blood pressure to increase. In rare cases, high blood pressure is caused by a kidney disorder.

Should I be worried about high blood pressure?

High blood pressure is not a disease. However, having high blood pressure for a long time does increase your risk of cardiovascular disease, such as a stroke or a heart attack. Other factors and diseases also increase that risk, such as age, high cholesterol, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, gout, cancer, chronic kidney damage, COPD (Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). Some factors are related to lifestyle. The most important factors related to lifestyle are smoking, being overweight, an unhealthy diet, little exercise/ movement and the (excessive) use of alcohol and drugs.

Advice for high blood pressure

Lifestyle changes can decrease your risk of cardiovascular disease. They can greatly contribute to improving your health and general condition and can even directly affect your (average) blood pressure. Therefore, it is important to follow (lifestyle) advice from your doctor:

- Quitting smoking is important. Smoking is very damaging to your heart and blood vessels.
- Make sure you get enough exercise. Exercise actively at least 2.5 hours a week (for example, walking, cycling, running, football (soccer), fitness training, dancing, martial arts)
- Maintain a healthy diet (in Dutch).
- It is also better not to eat liquorice. Eating a lot of liquorice and eating it often can increase blood pressure.
- It is best not to drink alcohol. If you do, then don't drink every day and not more than 1 glass a day.
- If you are overweight, try to lose weight by eating healthily and exercising more (exercising intensively at least 1 hour a day).
- If you have a lot of stress, try to find out what's causing it. Try to reduce your stress.

Medication for high blood pressure

Whether or not your GP recommends medication depends on your personal risk of cardiovascular disease. Your GP can estimate this risk. He or she will take into account some of the above mentioned risk factors.

It is important to note that the GP does not in general treat a high blood pressure, but rather he treats the risk of developing cardiovascular disease and gives advice as to keep the risk low. If your risk is low/moderate, you can lower your risk or keep it low by following the advice for a healthy lifestyle. If your risk is high or very high, blood pressure medication is most often necessary. It is very important to take the antihypertensive medication as prescribed, i.e. on a daily basis.

What happens next if you have high blood pressure?

How often you have to visit your GP for a check-up depends on other factors that increase your risk of cardiovascular disease. In general, once a year, you and your GP will look at your risk of cardiovascular diseases. If the risk has increased, you may be prescribed medication to lower your blood pressure.

High cholesterol

Cholesterol is a fatty substance. Your body uses cholesterol to make cells, hormones and bile. The cholesterol level(s) in your blood can become too high. High cholesterol is not a disease. Generally, it does not cause any symptoms. If your cholesterol is too high for many years, it can build up in the wall of your blood vessels. This makes your blood vessels narrower. They can then become blocked. This can cause problems with your heart and blood vessels.

Just like with a high blood pressure, the general practitioner does not treat a high cholesterol, but rather he/ she treats the risk of developing cardiovascular disease and gives advice as to keep the risk low. This may involve lifestyle changes and/ or medication. The advised lifestyle changes are mostly the same as advised for a high blood pressure.

Children's diseases with a rash

Exanthem is the medical name given to a widespread rash that is usually accompanied by systemic symptoms such as fever, malaise and headache. It is usually caused by an infectious condition such as a virus. Some exanthemas are caused by a bacterium. Exanthemas during childhood are very common and are usually due to specific viral/ bacterial infections like chickenpox (varicella zoster), mumps (mumps virus), measles (morbillivirus), rubella (rubella virus), erythema infectiosum (parvovirus B19) and exanthema subitum (human herpes virus type 6). In the Netherlands measles, rubella and mumps are very rare due to vaccination. The JGZ provides these vaccinations according to the *National Immunization Programme*. Most of these childhood exanthemas are usually harmless and in most cases, there is no need to visit a general practitioner. It is important to watch how sick your child is and to make sure he/ she drinks enough (see also chapter *Children with a fever*). Scarlet fever can however make a child very ill and have a high fever and a severe sore throat. Children can also be very sick from measles. Some of these diseases can be dangerous in pregnancy. For example, because they damage the unborn child. This only happens if the pregnant woman herself has never had the disease or never has been vaccinated against it. It concerns these spot diseases: chicken-pox, erythema infectiosum (in the Netherlands also called 'the 5th disease', rubella and measles.

Chickenpox

Chickenpox is a common and highly contagious childhood disease caused by the varicella zoster virus. Almost everyone in the Netherlands has had chicken pox at childhood age. Chickenpox is a disease that results in a characteristic skin rash that forms small, itchy blisters, which eventually scab over. It usually starts on the chest, back, and face. It may be accompanied by fever and tiredness. Complications are rare and in general it is considered to be an innocent childhood disease with a mild course. The disease is contagious to others from 2 days before the spots become visible, until the blisters have dried up. This takes about 10 days. It can pose a risk to pregnant women who have never been exposed to the virus. Women who have ever been vaccinated (unusual in NL) are also immune. This also applies to women who have previously had another child with chickenpox, as we can reasonably assume that mother was also previously exposed.

- Chickenpox is a highly contagious childhood disease, which in the Netherlands is considered an innocent children disease with a mild course. There is no known treatment/ medication for children with chickenpox.
- For itching one may apply zinc lotion or menthol gel, which can be bought (without prescription) at the drugstore (Kruidvat, Etos, etc.) or pharmacy.
- There is NO indication to consult a physician for a child with chickenpox, unless the child becomes very ill or is below 3 months of age.
- It may pose a risk to pregnant women who have never been exposed to the virus. This also applies to people with a compromised immune system. Most women have had the disease at a childhood age.
- Pregnant women who have never been exposed to the virus are advised to avoid contact with children with chickenpox. If there has been close contact the women are advised to consult their midwife (or general practitioner). Close contact is defined as a family contact; people having 'face contact' (< 2 meters) with a chickenpox patient for at least 5 minutes; people who stay in the same room for more than 1 hour as a patient with chickenpox.