Learn to:

- Assess your family’s medical symptoms and discover which steps to take next
- Differentiate between conditions you can treat at home and those which need medical attention
- Perform basic health checks and first aid procedures

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About the Author

Dr Knut Schroeder is a practising General Practitioner in Bristol, Honorary Senior Clinical Lecturer at the University of Bristol, a Fellow of the Royal College of General Practitioners and a GP trainer. His main interests (as far as work is concerned) include medical education and clinical diagnosis, and to these ends he has co-developed and taught courses on clinical diagnosis and evidence-based medicine to undergraduate students and postgraduate medical doctors.

Knut has written two previous books – Top Tips for GPs - A Beginner’s Guide to General Practice and the best-selling The 10-Minute Clinical Assessment – and is guest author on the third edition of the Oxford Handbook of General Practice. He co-wrote two chapters for the Oxford Textbook of Primary Medical Care and had articles and research papers published in major peer-reviewed international medical journals, including the British Medical Journal, The British Journal of General Practice, Family Practice and Archives of Internal Medicine. Knut’s passion is spending time with his wife and their two young boys and being outdoors running or cycling.

Dedication

Firstly, this book is dedicated to all the patients who trust their GPs with their worries and health concerns, particularly those whom I had the honour to know quite closely over the years and who’ve inspired me to write this book. I also dedicate it to all the caring, hardworking and enthusiastic nurses, doctors and other people working in the NHS – particularly my colleagues and the staff at The Stokes Medical Centre, who work so tirelessly at the ‘frontline’ (and behind the scenes!) towards better patient care.

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Introduction

Everybody develops new health problems sometimes. Often, these problems are familiar and not especially worrying. When you wake up with a slightly sore throat or get a mild headache after a long, busy day, for example, the chances are that you’ve already had this kind of thing before and you know instinctively what to do about it. You probably wait for a few days to see what happens, and in the meantime you might take some painkillers to help ease your symptoms.

But what if your sore throat doesn’t settle? What if your headache gets worse rather than better? And what if you develop other additional symptoms such as vomiting or a fever? At some stage, you’re likely to start worrying about your symptoms and start thinking what to do next, and whether you should seek medical advice.

Finding answers to these types of questions can be difficult. Your nan may have given you answers and advice on home remedies in the past, and yes, one of your friends might have spoken about a particular ‘catch-all cure’ for headaches. But then you remember that a distant relative of yours became seriously ill once because he ignored his health symptoms for too long, and so you begin to wonder whether it’s safe to ignore your own symptoms. That’s where this book comes in.

About This Book

This book tries to answer these types of questions. Think of it as an experienced friend, whom you can rely on when you’re dealing with a medical symptom and just don’t know what to do about it. This book (like a well-trusted and experienced granny) does the following:

✔ Explains in plain language what your symptom may mean, and what a sensible course of action may be.
✔ Gives you straight-talking information and advice before you call the doctor or go on the Internet to look up health information.
✔ Makes clear to you when you’re safe to wait and see what happens – and when you’re better off seeking professional, medical advice.
✔ Points you in the right direction of where to look or go next, because no book or friend can possibly give you the answers to every question about your health.
As the last point implies, you need to be aware of any book’s limitations as regards dealing with health symptoms, which are often straightforward but can sometimes be difficult to interpret. I do all I can to enable you to ‘read’ your symptoms, but if in doubt, always seek medical help and advice.

I based my decisions on what to include in this book largely on my own experience as a General Practitioner, and so I cover the topics that many patients tell me are important to them. The information and advice I give about symptoms and what to do about them is wherever possible based on good research evidence and current accepted medical guidelines in the UK.

I designed the book to be a health reference that you can dip in and out of as you like without the need to read from cover to cover, but if you want to read it all, to discover more about health symptoms and what they may mean, jump right in here!

Conventions Used in This Book

I use a few conventions in this book to help you navigate the text:

- **Italics** highlight new words – particularly medical terms. Usually I give you lay terms in plain English, but mention and explain medical terms as well, so you can look these words up in medical dictionaries or on the Internet if you want to. This approach may also help you to better understand any medical language that you hear health professionals using.

- **Boldfaced font** highlights the key concepts in a list, or the action part of a numbered list.

- **Monofont** is used for website addresses.

For general examples, I use the male gender in odd-numbered chapters and female in even-numbered chapters.

Scattered throughout the book are shaded areas called *sidebars*. In these sidebars you can find information that’s interesting but not essential – you can skip them if you want and still understand everything else.

What You Won’t Find in This Book

This book is neither a medical textbook, nor a reference about every health problem that exists. Also, I don’t provide detailed information about medication and other treatments, because they depend in many cases on the final diagnosis – which you always need to leave to a health professional if you’re in any doubt.