

FACT SHEET

Fighting antibiotic resistance by ensuring the rational use of medicines



What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are medicines that work by killing or stopping the growth of bacteria that cause us to be ill. Different types of antibiotics treat different kinds of infections. If you (over)use antibiotics when they are not needed, the bacteria in your body may become resistant to these medicines. And later, when you do need to take antibiotics to cure an infection, they will not work against resistant bacteria. This is called antibiotic resistance and it is becoming a public health problem in the European Union (EU).

The costs of antibiotic resistance

Antibiotic resistance can lead to the spread of serious infections. Evidence published by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control indicates that every year up to 40,000 patients suffer from infections that are resistant to multiple antibiotics [1]. Such infections cost at least €1.5 billion in extra healthcare expenditure and productivity loss across the European Union.

There are few antibiotics in the research and development pipeline. As resistance in bacteria grows, it will become more difficult to treat resistant infections with the antibiotics that are currently available. Only through their appropriate use can we reverse the trend in resistance and secure the effectiveness of antibiotics for use in future generations. Ensuring that antibiotics retain their therapeutic value is a joint responsibility.

Ensuring the rational use of medicines

Using antibiotics correctly is part of the rational use of medicines concept. Rational use of medicines requires that "patients receive medications appropriate to their clinical needs, in doses that meet their own individual requirements, for an adequate period of time, and at the lowest cost to them and their community" [2]. This means that the right medicine should be prescribed to and used by the right person to treat his or her symptoms at the right time.

Antibiotics used in bacterial infections should not be taken to treat a cough or mild seasonal flu symptoms caused by a virus. On such occasions, resting, doing light exercise and adjusting your diet might be sufficient to reduce or eliminate mild symptoms.

The role of medicines information in eliminating antibiotic resistance

Health Action International (HAI) Europe believes that everyone has a role to play in ensuring that medicines are prescribed and used rationally. In order to do so, decisions about the most appropriate course of treatment should always be based on the most objective information and not the most effective promotion. It is important to ensure that patients and consumers as well as healthcare professionals have access to independent and unbiased medicines information to guide their decision-making.

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HAI Europe's activities on the rational use of medicine

HAI Europe's ongoing campaigns and projects in this area monitor the European regulations that prohibit prescription-medicines advertising and that govern medicines information, in order to prevent promotional messages about prescription medicines. HAI Europe also works to raise awareness about the need to disclose all data related to the efficacy and safety of medicines, as we believe that medicines that cause serious adverse drug reactions (ADRs) should be re-evaluated or removed from the market to protect patients.

Training future health professionals

Medicines are a vital part of improving and maintaining health and healthcare professionals, such as doctors and pharmacists, play a key role in ensuring that medicines are prescribed and used rationally. However, numerous concerns have been raised about the relationship between healthcare professionals and the pharmaceutical industry - particularly the industry's influence on prescribing and dispensing decisions. This influence can lead to less than optimal treatment choices and can even be detrimental to patient health. To support the role of future health professionals, the World Health Organization and HAI created a new teaching tool to provide practical training for students on how to recognise various promotional techniques and how to access quality, independent information about medicines. The 'Understanding and responding to pharmaceutical promotion manual' represents a first step in preparing medical and pharmacy professionals for dealing with the effects of marketing on their everyday practice.

Initiatives by HAI Europe members

BUKO Pharma-Kampagne - Using the "*Schluck & weg*" (Chug-a-pill) street theatre group, campaigners travelled across Germany to raise awareness about the dangers of multi drug-resistant tuberculosis. Similar to antibiotic resistance, multi-drug resistant TB can be caused when patients do not complete a full course of treatment. More information can be found at: <http://www.bukopharma.de/>

Health Projects for Latvia – This group has organised a series of seminars for the public, healthcare professionals and the media to raise awareness about the rational use of medicines, and specifically antibiotic use. These presentations have changed public attitude as people are now less inclined to take antibiotics, while doctors are more careful about prescribing these medicines. More information can be found at: www.healthprojectsforlatvia.lv

More information about HAI Europe

What is HAI Europe? Leaflet and Annual Workplan Brochure: <http://haieurope.org/publications/policy-briefs/>

Learn more about HAI Europe membership: <http://haieurope.org/hai-europe/hai-europe-membership/>



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