

Survey Shows Europeans Need Better Information on Antibiotics

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EU - In a special Eurobarometer report, it has emerged that the use of antibiotics in human medicine is declining in the European Union but that much work still needed, according to the Eurosurveillance editorial team at the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) in Stockholm, Sweden.

According to the Special Eurobarometer 407, 'Antimicrobial resistance' published in November 2013, most Europeans (84 per cent) are aware that the overuse of antibiotics makes them ineffective.

However, the general knowledge of Europeans about antibiotics remains quite low and results in the misuse of these drugs.

When asked questions about antibiotics and how they work, 49 per cent of respondents replied that antibiotics kill viruses whereas 40 per cent correctly replied that antibiotics do not kill viruses. More than one in 10 (11 per cent) could not answer the question. Only slightly more than half of those polled (52 per cent) could reply correctly that antibiotics are not effective against colds and influenza.

Most respondents (66 per cent) are aware that the use of antibiotics can cause side-effects but nearly one-fifth (19 per cent) cannot answer the question.

The above responses illustrate the challenge of those who try to make Europeans have a more prudent attitude towards antibiotic use.

The survey concludes that media campaigns are efficient sources of information but that they need to be targeted better in order to reach the desired audience and that the public regard healthcare workers and pharmacies as trusted sources of information for advising on the proper use of antibiotics. The Eurobarometer is an instrument used by the European Commission to map public opinion in the European Union (EU). The standard Eurobarometer is based on about 1,000 face-to-face interviews per Member State and reports are published twice a year. Special Eurobarometer reports such as the above are based on in-depth thematic studies.

The 2013 Special Eurobarometer used the same questions and addressed the same objectives as a previous one published in 2010. It aimed to:

- map the use of antibiotics in the EU: how often users took them, how they were obtained and why they were taken
- measure how much the public knows about the effectiveness of antibiotics and the risks linked to their inappropriate use, and
- determine the impact of antibiotic awareness campaigns.

Encouraging findings are that the use of antibiotics has declined among respondents who reported having taken antibiotics in the last 12 months from 40 per cent in 2009 to 35 per cent in 2013; still there is a two-fold difference in this percentage among EU countries.

The large majority of those who used antibiotics in the time covered by the survey got them from a healthcare provider but three per cent of users obtained them without prescription. Antimicrobial resistance represents a serious threat to public health and patient safety and is a worldwide problem. The European Antibiotic Awareness Day (EAAD) is a European health initiative, coordinated by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) since 2008, which aims to provide a platform and support for national campaigns on the prudent use of antibiotics. The European Commission adopted an 'Action plan against the rising threats against Antimicrobial Resistance' in 2011. One important aim of the action plan is to conduct research about effective ways to fight antimicrobial resistance and to ensure that antimicrobials are used appropriately