

Most GP patients wrong on antibiotic use: Study

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More than two-thirds of patients who visit general practitioner (GP) clinics here are not aware that antibiotics don't work against viruses – such as those which cause the common cold – according to a study done by researchers here.

Around the same number of patients wrongly believe that antibiotics cure upper respiratory tract infections (URTIs) more quickly.

Most URTIs, which include a sore throat, blocked or runny nose, and acute bronchitis, are caused by viruses and usually resolve on their own. They cannot be cured by antibiotics, which are used to prevent and treat bacterial infections such as urinary tract infections and pneumonia.

The study was based on 914 patients aged 21 and above from 24 GP clinics. It was conducted last year by students from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore, with public health experts from the National University Health System.

It found that a third of patients expected antibiotics to be prescribed by their GPs for common ailments, with half of these patients asking for the medication or going to another doctor if it was not given.

In addition, around one-tenth of patients kept antibiotic stocks at home, and took leftover ones.

“Not finishing the course of antibiotics can reduce their effectiveness and even contribute to the spread

of drug-resistant bacteria in the community,” said Dr Mark Chen, assistant professor at NUS' Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health and one of the lead researchers.

The prevalent use and misuse of antibiotics has created drug-resistant bacteria that are much harder to treat, which, according to experts, pose a serious health threat.

Dr Chen said more public education is needed to prevent the unnecessary use of antibiotics. “Doctors can also offer patients a deferred prescription – the patient may come back in a couple of days' time if they feel that the symptoms are getting worse, and the doctor then gets a chance to reassess the same patient to see if it is a bacterial infection that truly needs antibiotics.”

Doctors told *The Straits Times* they usually do not prescribe antibiotics on the first visit. “It's quite common for most of my patients who have viral infections to ask for antibiotics, and if possible, I get them to come back again to the clinic to review,” said Dr Sam Wong, a GP at Parkway Shenton Group.

Dr Lee Kwok Keong, GP at Avenue K Clinic in Punggol, said he gets “quite a lot of requests from patients who travel overseas frequently for antibiotics”.

“However, overall, requests for antibiotics are much lower at my clinic, possibly because Punggol is a younger estate and people are more aware of their uses.”

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