

Study examines use (and misuse) of antibiotics in Europe

Even though the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that antibiotic use is a critical health issue, there is no publicly available data on antibiotic use in most European Union countries.

Researchers had to look at individual hospitals in 15 EU member nations in order to determine which countries were using -- or overusing -- antibiotics and increasing the risk of drug-resistant "super bacteria."

The study revealed that there is a wide discrepancy in the use of antibiotics from one country to another, with France far outdistancing the Netherlands and other Scandinavian nations.

Dr. Otto Cars and colleagues from the Swedish Institute for Infectious Diseases Control, Stockholm, reported that the French gave nearly 37 antibiotic doses every day for each 1,000 people, compared with just about 9 doses per 1,000 people in the Netherlands.

"We expected to see a variation, but the 4-fold difference between the EU countries was unexpectedly high," Cars told Reuters Health.

More alarming was the fact that in some countries, the use of antibiotics increased dramatically. This was most notable in Italy, where antibiotic sales soared 34%. Sweden's use of the drug, however, decreased by 21% during this same time period.

The overuse and misuse of antibiotics has been linked to the development of a new generation of "superbugs" -- bacteria which are resistant to antibiotics. Superbugs have become a particular problem in hospitals, where infections often run rampant and can have serious, even fatal, consequences.

"Obviously, total antibiotic consumption is one major factor in driving resistance," said Cars. "I do not think it is possible to reverse this process, but a more judicious use of antibiotics could probably slow down the rate of emergence of resistance."

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