

Media Release

Keep antibiotics working for you

Johannesburg, 13 October: Imagine catching a nasty infectious disease, such as pneumonia, diarrhea or pink eye and finding the bug you've got is resistant to any drug your doctor prescribes. As antibiotic resistance increases, this is a reality that more and more patients across the globe could face.

"The sad reality is that as many as 70% of GP prescriptions for antibiotics in South Africa are inappropriate," says Dr. Konji Sebati, CEO of The Innovative Pharmaceutical Association of South (IPASA). "The result is that patients are developing resistance to some antibiotics used to effectively fight common infections in the past."

Antibiotics have been used since the 1940s to kill dangerous disease-causing bacteria, but using antibiotics inappropriately – for instance to treat illnesses caused by viruses and not bacteria – not only affects your own immune system, but can lead to drug-resistant bugs or 'super-bugs' developing in communities.

Dr. Sebati says patients have an important role to play in protecting antibiotic resources: "Patients must also take responsibility for antibiotic abuse. Doctors have a challenge of limited consultation times and patients expecting an antibiotic to be prescribed to them for quicker recovery times, and if they turn them down they just move to another doctor to get them. Patients have to take the time to reflect on whether they 'really need an antibiotic' to protect themselves from as well from being immune to them in future.

"Antibiotics are easy to take either orally or via injection, they have few side effects and most older antibiotics – especially those with generic alternatives are very affordable which makes them an effective treatment tool," she adds. "We really need to protect the antibiotics we have."

To develop new antibiotics is a lengthy and expensive process. Only five of IPASA's 25 member pharmaceutical companies are actively engaged in developing new antibiotics. Globally over the past three decades only two new classes of antibacterial medicines have been discovered, compared to 11 in the previous 50 years.

"Even if we can increase the number of drugs discovered, the task will never be complete because our most recently approved and most effective drugs will gradually decline in efficiency and we will need to replace them," says Dr. Sebati. She outlines a few simple tips for using antibiotics appropriately to protect you and your family's health:

Viral or bacterial?

Ask your doctor whether your infection is likely to be viral or bacterial. Antibiotics are highly effective against a wide variety of bacterial infections such as strep throat, tonsillitis, and sinusitis. But doctors too often prescribe antibiotics for non-specific respiratory infections like the common cold that are almost always caused by viruses. Antibiotics are only necessary if that cold is likely to progress to a serious bacterial illness, which most cases don't. Insist on diagnostic tests to ensure whether your infection is susceptible to antibiotic treatment.

Set regular times for taking your antibiotic

It's a good idea to take your antibiotic at similar times each day. Check whether you should take your medication with food or before meals. Don't skip doses as this prevents you from

maintaining high enough levels of the antibiotic in your system, which means the bacteria aren't destroyed properly. Don't try and compensate for a skipped dose by taking more than the prescribed amount of antibiotic.

Take the full dose

If you do not take the full dose of an antibiotic, it only kills some of the bacteria in your system and can make the rest antibiotic-resistant, which means antibiotics may not work as well for you in the future. If you stop prematurely, the bacteria that survive are the strongest and are therefore harder to kill. Finish the dose to guard your future health.

Keep your own health record

Our fragmented health system means we don't always see the same doctor or we use a variety of healthcare providers. Keep a list of which antibiotics you or your children have been prescribed to ensure that you aren't using antibiotics inappropriately. Ask for copies of diagnostic tests to keep in your own health file. This way you can monitor your antibiotic use.

Sharing is not caring

Don't share antibiotics - never take someone else's medication. Each antibiotic is designed to treat a particular condition and your doctor will take your weight and other medications into account when working out doses. What works for someone else, may not work for you.

Prevent illness in the first place

Make sure you have good infection control measures in place at home – regular hand washing, for example, can significantly reduce the spread of infection. Use cleaning agents to keep food surfaces clean and keep your immunity up by eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly.

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