

Antibiotic curbs put older people at risk

Chris Smyth, Health Editor

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Those aged over 65 who were not given antibiotics for a suspected urinary tract infection were eight times more likely to develop sepsis GETTY IMAGES

Pressure on GPs to cut down on antibiotics may be leading to fatal infections in older people, a study suggests.

Those over 65 who did not immediately receive antibiotics for a common illness were up to eight times as likely to develop sepsis and up to twice as likely to die, researchers found.

GPs have been urged not to delay giving antibiotics to older people with urinary tract infections. However, they say that they are in an impossible position: accused of not prescribing enough antibiotics but also blamed for giving too many and promoting superbugs.

Overuse of antibiotics is accelerating the rate at which bacteria become impervious to the drugs, regarded as one of the worst threats to health because it would make common infections impossible to treat and potentially fatal.

GPs have cut their use of antibiotics by 13 per cent in five years as guidelines urge them either not to offer them at all or to delay prescribing them until it is clear that an infection is not going to go away by itself.

However, evidence had focused on younger people. Researchers at Imperial College London have now looked at more than 150,000 people aged over 65 who visited GPs with a suspected urinary tract infection.

Although 87 per cent received antibiotics immediately, 7 per cent did not get them at all and 6 per cent had them after a delay. In the next two months 0.2 per cent of patients who were given immediate antibiotics developed sepsis, but the risk was seven times higher in those whose prescription was delayed and eight times higher for those who did not get the drugs at all.

Researchers estimated in *The BMJ* that one extra case of sepsis would occur for every 37 patients not given antibiotics and every 51 patients whose drugs were delayed.

Guidelines advise GPs to recommend paracetamol and drinking plenty of water. Myriam Gharbi, lead author of the paper, said: “This is to avoid antibiotic overuse, as sometimes urinary tract infections can get better without medication. However, our research suggests that antibiotics should not be delayed in elderly patients.”

Paul Aylin, senior author of the study, said: “Our study suggests early use of antibiotics in elderly patients with urinary tract infection is the safest approach.”

Helen Stokes-Lampard, chairwoman of the Royal College of GPs, said: “GPs are in an incredibly difficult position when it comes to antibiotics prescribing. We are under huge pressure not to prescribe — and publicly vilified when we are deemed to do so too readily — yet we know that in some cases antibiotics are a matter of life or death. Getting the balance right every time is extremely challenging.”

Alan Johnson, a clinical scientist at Public Health England who collaborated on the research, said that efforts were under way to help doctors to target antibiotics better.

- Four in ten GPs plan to leave the NHS within the next five years as doctors say a push for online appointments is making matters worse, a survey has shown.

The University of Warwick poll of 929 GPs in the west of England showed that the figure had risen from 32 per cent in the same region in 2014 to 42 per cent. Overwork was the main reason given and GPs said that online appointments had exacerbated this by making it easier for patients to contact them. The average retirement age for GPs has fallen two years to 58 since 2012.

NHS England said the survey, published in *BMJ Open*, represented a “tiny percentage” but that it was encouraging GPs to stay by offering financial, educational and staffing support. More GPs were in training than ever, it added.