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Antibiotics still used to treat flu when not indicated



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Antibiotics are often used in treating upper respiratory tract infections (URTIs), such as influenza, even though they are not indicated, an expert said.

"The point that is never emphasized enough is that if a patient has a cold or flu, antibiotics will not work," said Professor Philip Eng, a consultant respiratory and intensive care unit (ICU) physician at Mount Elizabeth Hospital, Singapore.

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He added that studies which have looked at health outcomes of influenza patients have found that antibiotic utilization is of no use.

Influenza is characterized by the abrupt onset of symptoms such as fever, chills, myalgia, headache, tiredness, non-productive cough, sore throat and rhinitis. The condition typically resolves in a few days although malaise may continue for up to 2 weeks.

Eng pointed out that there is little good research on the treatment of URTIs. "Believe it or not, I searched for well-written guidelines on the use of antibiotics in URTIs and I found only one good one," he said, referring to guidelines published by the American Academy of Family Physicians. [*Am Fam Physician* 2006 Sep 15;74(6):956-966]

The guidelines, Eng noted, recommend antibiotics for patients with acute bacterial sinusitis who have had persistent and progressive symptoms for more than 10 days, patients with acute pharyngitis caused by group A streptococci and who have tonsillopharyngeal exudates and erythema and tender cervical lymph nodes and patients with acute bronchitis with underlying chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

"For patients with acute bronchitis and underlying COPD, antibiotics are indicated and they do actually decrease the time to hospitalization, the time to the next exacerbation, and they lower 60- to 90-day mortality," Eng said.

The more suitable treatment for influenza is an antiviral medication, said Eng.

He noted, however, that there is no good data from double-blind, randomized, cross-



Antibiotics are of limited use in treating upper respiratory tract infections.

over controlled trials to support the use of with severe influenza who require admission into the ICU. **MI**

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