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Widespread public misunderstanding about antibiotic resistance: WHO

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Antibiotic resistance happens when bacteria change and become resistant to the antibiotics used to treat the infections they cause. Over-use and misuse of antibiotics increase the development of resistant bacteria, and this survey points out some of the practices, gaps in understanding and misconceptions which contribute to this phenomenon.

Almost two thirds (64 percent) of some 10 000 people who were surveyed across 12 countries say they know antibiotic resistance is an issue that could affect them and their families, but how it affects them and what they can do to address it are not well understood. For example, 64 percent of respondents believe antibiotics can be used to treat colds and flu, despite the fact that antibiotics have no impact on viruses. Close to one third (32 percent) of people surveyed believe they should stop taking antibiotics when they feel better, rather than completing the prescribed course of treatment.

"The rise of antibiotic resistance is a global health crisis, and governments now recognize it as one of the greatest challenges for public health today. It is reaching dangerously high levels in all parts of the world," says Dr Margaret Chan, WHO director-general, in launching the survey findings today. "Antibiotic resistance is compromising our ability to treat infectious diseases and undermining many advances in medicine."

The survey findings coincide with the launch of a new WHO campaign 'Antibiotics: Handle with care'-a global initiative to improve understanding of the problem and change the way antibiotics are used.

The conclusions from India were drawn on the basis of 1,023 online interviews:
Ã¢â?¬Â¢ More than three quarters (76 percent) of respondents report having taken antibiotics within the past six months; 90 percent say they were prescribed or provided by a doctor or nurse.
Ã¢â?¬Â¢ Three quarters (75 percent) of respondents think, incorrectly, that colds and flu can be treated with antibiotics; and only 58 percent know that they should stop taking antibiotics only when they finish the course as directed.
Ã¢â?¬Â¢ While 75 percent agree that antibiotic resistance is one of the biggest problems in the world, 72 percent of respondents believe experts will solve the problem before it becomes too serious.

"The findings of this survey point to the urgent need to improve understanding around antibiotic resistance," says Dr Keiji Fukuda, special representative of the director-general for antimicrobial resistance. "This campaign is just one of the ways we are working with governments, health authorities and other partners to reduce antibiotic resistance. One of the biggest health challenges of the 21st century will require global behaviour change by individuals and societies."

The multi-country survey included 14 questions on the use of antibiotics, knowledge of antibiotics and of antibiotic resistance, and used a mix of online and face-to-face interviews. It was conducted in 12 countries: Barbados, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, the Russian Federation, Serbia, South Africa, Sudan and Viet Nam. While not claiming to be exhaustive, this and other surveys will help WHO and partners to determine the key gaps in public understanding of this problem and misconceptions about how to use antibiotics to be addressed through the campaign.

Some common misconceptions revealed by the survey include:

Ã¢â?¬Â¢ Three quarters (76 percent) of respondents think that antibiotic resistance happens when the body becomes resistant to antibiotics. In fact bacteria-not humans or animals-become resistant to antibiotics and their spread causes hard-to-treat infections.
Ã¢â?¬Â¢ Two thirds (66 percent) of respondents believe that individuals are not at risk of a drug-resistant infection if they personally take their antibiotics as prescribed. Nearly half (44 percent) of people surveyed think antibiotic resistance is only a problem for people who take antibiotics regularly. In fact, anyone, of any age, in any country can get an antibiotic-resistant infection.
Ã¢â?¬Â¢ More than half (57 percent) of respondents feel there is not much they can do to stop antibiotic resistance, while nearly two thirds (64 percent) believe medical experts will solve the problem before it becomes too serious.

Another key finding of the survey was that almost three quarters (73 percent) of respondents say farmers should give fewer antibiotics to food-producing animals.

To address this growing problem, a global action plan to tackle antimicrobial resistance was endorsed at the World Health Assembly in May 2015. One of the plan's five objectives is to improve awareness and understanding of antibiotic resistance through effective communication, education and training.