

## Antibiotics - an information leaflet for staff in care homes and community hospitals

### What is this leaflet about?

This leaflet explains how we can make sure that antibiotics are used safely and effectively in frail elderly people in hospital and community settings.

### SOME GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT USING ANTIBIOTICS

#### What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are important medicines used to treat infections caused by bacteria. Bacteria can adapt and find ways to survive the effects of an antibiotic. They become 'antibiotic resistant' so that the antibiotic is no longer effective at treating infections. The more often we use an antibiotic, the more likely it is that bacteria will become resistant to it. Some bacteria that cause infections in hospitals, such as MRSA, are resistant to several antibiotics.

#### How can antibiotic resistance be avoided?

By using antibiotics less often we can slow down the development of resistance. It's not possible to stop it completely, but slowing it down stops resistance spreading and buys some time to develop new types of antibiotics.

#### What can we do about antibiotic resistance?

By only using antibiotics when it's appropriate to do so. We now know that most coughs and colds get better just as quickly without antibiotics. When they are prescribed, the complete course should be taken in order to get rid of the bacteria completely. If the course isn't completed, some bacteria may be left to develop resistance.

#### So when should antibiotics be used?

Doctors and other prescribers will only prescribe antibiotics when they are really necessary, for example for a kidney infection or pneumonia. By not using them unnecessarily, they are more likely to work when we need them.

### SPECIFIC ADVICE ABOUT USING ANTIBIOTICS IN FRAIL ELDERLY PEOPLE

#### How can antibiotics be used safely and effectively in frail elderly people?

Local antibiotic prescribing guidelines should be available in all healthcare settings to ensure the correct antibiotics are used. User friendly guidance to support diagnosis of infection should be available in all healthcare settings to help staff:

- recognise infection;
- assess how bad the infection is; and

- decide whether samples of blood or urine should be taken for sending to the laboratory.

Before prescribing an antibiotic the prescriber should see the person rather than speaking to them, a carer or healthcare staff on the phone. This makes sure that the person's symptoms and general condition of health has been assessed properly.

### **What do doctors and other prescribers need to consider when prescribing antibiotics for frail elderly people?**

- how the person will benefit from treatment;
- the type of infection and how bad it is;
- the person's other health conditions; and
- other medication the person is taking.

### **What about using antibiotics in the final days or weeks of life?**

For people who are in their final weeks or days of their lives the doctor needs to consider the benefits and risks of antibiotic treatment on an individual basis.

### **How should people be monitored when they are receiving antibiotic treatment?**

Healthcare staff should monitor people for the following signs regularly to check if symptoms are improving:

- temperature returned to normal;
- increased energy;
- being more alert;
- improved mobility; and
- increased appetite.

Monitoring people regularly can also help healthcare professionals identify any side effects for example:

- nausea (feeling sick);
- vomiting;
- diarrhoea; and
- skin rash.

If a person does not respond to antibiotic treatment after 48 hours or experiences side effects from treatment, this should be highlighted to healthcare staff who will contact a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

### **Urinary tract infections are common in frail elderly people, particularly in women. How should antibiotics be used to treat them?**

Elderly people often have bacteria present in their urine but usually this is harmless and does not mean they have an infection. If a person has symptoms such as fever, pain when passing urine or increased confusion this may suggest a urinary tract infection and healthcare staff should contact a doctor for advice. Some elderly people suffer recurrent urinary tract infections (two infections within 6 months or three infections within 12 months) and a 3 - 6 month trial of treatment with antibiotics at night may be considered to prevent further infections. Longer term use of antibiotics should be avoided as this will increase the chance of having an infection caused by bacteria which are resistant to some antibiotics.