

16th November 2012

People need to know they can self treat their coughs, colds and sore throats –antibiotics won't help so give 'tweetment' instead

As part of European Antibiotic Awareness Day (18th November), the Self Care Forum welcomes the Health Protection Agency's advice that everyone should think twice before they ask for antibiotics from their doctor for their cold and flu symptoms. Many people don't realise just how long the symptoms of coughs, colds and sore throats can go on for which often means they stop self-treating sooner than is necessary and visit the doctor to request unneeded antibiotics.

In line with NICE guidelines¹, the length of time that illnesses last for on average is ear infection (4 days), sore throat (1 week), common cold (1½ weeks), sinusitis (2½ weeks), cough or bronchitis (3 weeks).

Dr Pete Smith, GP in Kingston-upon-Thames, speaking at the national Self Care Forum Self Care Conference said: "Antibiotics don't work in the treatment of coughs, colds and sore throats and evidence shows that coughs last 3 weeks, and sore throats a week, no matter what we do. If we prescribe antibiotics people keep coming back for them resulting in ineffective treatments being prescribed."

Gopa Mitra, PAGB and Self Care Forum Board member notes: "There is good evidence that people tend to give up self care and seek the advice of a doctor within typically a period of 4-7 days, which is often too early for GPs to tell if the symptoms are more serious."²

Dr Smith believes that people need to be given information about how long these symptoms normally last and has devised some simple messages (of 140 characters or less as used on Twitter) for GPs to use in consultations. He calls them his 'tweetments' and has started with the two most common ones for use during the winter season; cough and sore throat³. "I am already using them and my patients like them. They get the reassurance they were looking for and learn what to do next time."

-ENDS-

European Antibiotics Awareness Day is organised by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). Further information, along with a toolkit of communications materials that can be used in local and national campaigns and events can be found at: <http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/eaad/Pages/Home.aspx>

The Health Protection Agency is an independent UK organisation that was set up by the government in 2003 to protect the public from threats to their health from infectious diseases and environmental hazards. In April 2013, subject to the usual approvals procedures for establishing new bodies, the Health Protection Agency will become part of a new organisation called Public Health England, an executive agency of the Department of Health. To find out more, visit the HPA website at <http://www.hpa.org.uk>, follow on Twitter (@HPAuk) or 'Like' on Facebook at www.facebook.com/HealthProtectionAgency

The Self Care Forum is a network of doctors, nurses, patient groups, NHS managers, pharmacists, the Department of Health and the OTC medicines industry. The purpose of the Self Care Forum is to further the reach of self care and embed it into everyday life.

Visit the Self Care Forum website at: www.selfcareforum.org

For further information please contact: Libby Whittaker at libby.whittaker@selfcareforum.org and on 020 7421 9318 or Gopa Mitra's out-of-hours number is: 07887 516 476

¹ NICE short clinical guideline on reducing antibiotic prescribing for respiratory tract infections cites the usual natural history of the illness and average total illness length as sore throat: one week; common cold: one and half weeks, sinusitis: two and a half weeks; cough: three weeks." <http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG69QRG.pdf>

² Self Care Journal; 2010; 1:1-13; Self care for minor ailments: a survey of consumer and healthcare professional beliefs and behaviour; I. Banks, The Men's Health Forum, London UK

³ Cough tweet: '90% of coughs last up to 3 weeks and will not be helped by antibiotics unless you are elderly, very ill or have another health condition' – 138 characters

Sore throat tweet: 'Most sore throats will last up to 7 days and will clear without antibiotics. Paracetamol or ibuprofen and fluids are the best treatment' – 138 characters including spaces