

# Perception that antibiotics are harmless is widespread

May 31 2018

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A new study of decision-making about the use of antibiotics in medicine has found that the mistaken belief that antibiotics are harmless is widespread, especially among patients. Clinicians and patients alike are influenced by the general notion of "why not take a risk" ("WNTAR"), a belief that there is potential benefit and very little risk in taking

antibiotics, when in reality there are specific downsides, both for individuals and for society as a whole.

The team of researchers from George Washington University, Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics & Policy (CDDEP), University of California-Davis, Cornell University, and Johns Hopkins University surveyed 149 clinicians and 225 patients from two large urban academic hospitals and 519 online non-patient subjects to determine whether providers share patients' rationales for antibiotic use. They discovered that when comparing the status quo of remaining sick to the potential benefits of antibiotic use, patients are more likely to expect [antibiotics](#), leading clinicians to prescribe them more despite having a greater knowledge of the drugs and their side effects. The research was published May 30, 2018 in the journal *Medical Decision Making*.

The study—Patients' and Clinicians' Perceptions of Antibiotic Prescribing for Upper Respiratory Infections in the Acute Care Setting—also found the "WNTAR" belief can lead to increased healthcare costs and adverse reactions, such as antibiotic resistance and secondary infections.

"The problem is that patients, but more surprisingly [clinicians](#), are not fully recognizing the potential harms from antibiotic use", said Dr. Klein of CDDEP. "Despite the fact that approximately 20% of patients can get some sort of side effect, this does not seem to be as important a factor in decision-making as one would expect."

Dr. Broniatowski and colleagues hope a better understanding of this issue will lead to the development of educational strategies that can be used to communicate risks and consequences, with the ultimate goal of reducing inappropriate prescribing and alleviating antibiotic resistance.

"The most important driver of antibiotic resistance is antibiotic use," Dr.

Klein added. "Eliminating unnecessary antibiotic use would eliminate unnecessary harms to [patients](#), and help reduce the spread of [antibiotic resistance](#), which threatens the medical gains of the last century."

**More information:** David A. Broniatowski et al, Patients' and Clinicians' Perceptions of Antibiotic Prescribing for Upper Respiratory Infections in the Acute Care Setting, *Medical Decision Making* (2018). DOI: [10.1177/0272989X18770664](https://doi.org/10.1177/0272989X18770664)

Provided by Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics & Policy

Citation: Perception that antibiotics are harmless is widespread (2018, May 31) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-05-perception-antibiotics-harmless-widespread.html>

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