

UK govt admits antibiotic shortage

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The UK government on Thursday admitted there were serious shortages of antibiotics to treat bacterial infections in children, despite more than a week of denials.

"Serious shortage protocols" had been issued for three types of oral solutions used in pediatrics—Phenoxyethylpenicillin, which is also

known as penicillin V.

It comes after at least 19 children died in the United Kingdom from severe cases of Group A Streptococcus (Strep A) infection, and shortages of other types of antibiotics in Europe and North America.

Family doctors and parents have reported difficulty finding antibiotics to treat Strep A, which typically causes a sore throat and fever and flu-like symptoms.

Pharmacies have been out of stock and some outlets say they are being charged up to £19 (\$24) for a box, when the price is normally just a few pounds.

They say they are losing thousands of pounds a week as they can only recoup a fraction of the cost from the state-run National Health Service (NHS).

The UK competition regulator on Wednesday announced a probe into drug companies for putting up prices as demand soars.

On the penicillin shortages, health minister Will Quince acknowledged that increased demand had left some pharmacists unable to meet prescriptions.

"These Serious Shortage Protocols will allow pharmacists to supply an alternative form of penicillin, which will make things easier for them, patients, and GPs," he added.

Quince said the situation was "temporary" and "localized" because of the high numbers of Strep A and Scarlet Fever cases.

The government was working with manufacturers and wholesalers to

speed up supplies, he added.

The health ministry said SSPs were "standard procedure" and are used often "to manage temporary and potential medicine supply issues".

They allow pharmacists to legally supply a specified alternative medicine rather than forcing a patient to get another prescription from their doctor.

Last Wednesday, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak dismissed fears of a national shortage of antibiotics for Strep A.

"There are no current shortages of drugs available to treat this and there are well-established procedures in place to ensure that that remains the case," he told parliament on December 7.

The number of known child deaths from the disease grew on Thursday, as updated data from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) showed 16 children have died in England since September.

Meanwhile, three other deaths of youngsters aged under 18 have been recorded in Northern Ireland and Wales.

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