

UK watchdog to probe spike in Strep A drug prices

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The UK's competition regulator on Wednesday announced a probe into drug companies for raising prices of antibiotics used to treat Group A Streptococcus (Strep A).

At least 17 children have died in the UK from severe cases of Strep A this winter season, according to the UK Health Security Agency.

Its director Colin Brown said that although case numbers were higher than usual, cases leading to more serious illnesses were "still uncommon".

GPs and parents, however, have reported struggles to get hold of antibiotics to treat the [bacterial infection](#), which typically causes a [sore throat](#) and fever, as pharmacies are out of stock.

Some pharmacists say they are being charged up to £19 (\$23.60) for a box of drugs that normally costs just a few pounds, as demand soars.

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

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) reminded [drug manufacturers](#) that it is illegal for a dominant company to charge excessive prices, or for any companies to collude to drive up prices.

"People have got real concerns about the price of antibiotics used to treat Strep A, and we want companies to be clear about their obligations under the law," a spokesperson said.

"We are working to establish the facts of what is currently happening in the market and welcome new information as part of our work.

"We stand ready to take action if there is evidence of anti-competitive behaviour that breaks the law."

Leyla Hannbeck, the chief executive of the Association of Independent Multiple Pharmacies (AIMP) which represents pharmacies in the UK, said the supply problem is getting worse and urged the government to take action.

"I raised this concern about antibiotic supply last Sunday," she told AFP. "It is now 10 days later and the situation is not getting better, but worse.

"My question is why did they (the government) not start doing something instead of denying it."

Last week, Health Secretary Steve Barclay said there was no shortage of antibiotics and stock could be moved around if any particular area was experiencing problems with supply.

But on Monday, his department issued a medicine supply notification for antibiotics for the treatment of Strep A.

"Supplies of antibiotics for the treatment of Group A Strep have seen a surge in demand and may be temporarily in limited supply at certain wholesalers and pharmacies," it said.

"Supplies are available with manufacturers, and deliveries into

wholesalers and pharmacies are being expedited and are expected in the coming days."

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