

Survey reveals 1 in 3 parents believe children always need antibiotics for ear infections

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Study highlights misperceptions on the role of antibiotics in managing common childhood illness.

Over a third (36%) of surveyed parents incorrectly assume children always need antibiotics for ear infections, according to new research from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA).

Ear infections are very common, particularly in children, and often get better on their own within 3 days although sometimes symptoms can last up to a week. Research shows that as few as 1 in 5 children are likely to require antibiotics to treat an ear infection.

The UKHSA-led study, published in the British Journal of General Practice, surveyed over 500 parents across England whose children had experienced ear infection symptoms in the previous year. It was carried out as part of ongoing UKHSA work to identify opportunities to help reduce avoidable antibiotic use.

The survey found that most parents (74%) who consult a healthcare professional do so within 1 to 2 days of their child's symptoms appearing.

Only around half (49%) of parents thought that most childhood ear infections can get better without antibiotics. A quarter (27%) were unsure.

The study also revealed gaps between what parents expected from consultations and what they received. Significantly more parents expected advice on whether their child needed antibiotics (43%) than actually received it (28%). Of those who consulted a healthcare professional, just over half (56%) reported their child was prescribed antibiotics.

Catherine Hayes, UKHSA study lead, said:

Ear infections are very common and can cause real distress to both children and families, but antibiotics are often not necessary. Our survey highlights that more can be done to support parents to understand when an ear infection is serious and what they can do. UKHSA's work will aim to address this by developing resources to support health professionals and patients during consultations.

While antibiotics are sometimes necessary for children with ear infections, unnecessary antibiotic use can cause side effects in children and contribute to antimicrobial resistance. If your child is prescribed antibiotics, it's important to follow the advice of your GP, nurse or pharmacist.

Dr Haroon Ahmed, GP and Clinical Reader in Epidemiology at Cardiff University, said:

Advice on what to do if you think your child has an ear infection is available on the NHS website. If prescribed antibiotics, it's important to ensure they are taken exactly as

directed by your GP, nurse or pharmacist.

The research further highlighted the significant impact ear infections have on family life. Over two-fifths (42%) of parents had to take time off work, whilst nearly two-thirds (62%) said their child missed school or nursery. Work pressures appeared to influence consulting behaviour, with parents who missed work nearly 5 times more likely to seek medical help.

UKHSA data published in November showed antibiotic-resistant infections equate to nearly 400 new cases per week, underlining the importance of using antibiotics only when needed.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/survey-reveals-1-in-3-parents-believe-children-always-need-antibiotics-for-ear-infections>