

# Special Eurobarometer: Use of antibiotics declining in the European Union but much work still needed

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According to the Special Eurobarometer 407, 'Antimicrobial resistance' published in November 2013, most Europeans (84%) are aware that the overuse of antibiotics makes them ineffective [1]. However, the general knowledge of Europeans about antibiotics remains quite low and results in the misuse of these drugs. When asked questions about antibiotics and how they work, 49% of respondents replied that antibiotics kill viruses whereas 40% correctly replied that antibiotics do not kill viruses. More than one in ten (11%) could not answer the question. Only slightly more than half of those polled (52%) could reply correctly that antibiotics are not\* effective against colds and influenza. Most respondents (66%) are aware that the use of antibiotics can cause side-effects but nearly one fifth (19%) cannot answer the question. The above responses illustrate the challenge of those who try to make Europeans have a more prudent attitude towards antibiotic use.

The survey concludes that media campaigns are efficient sources of information but that they need to be targeted better in order to reach the desired audience and that the public regard healthcare workers and pharmacies as trusted sources of information for advising on the proper use of antibiotics.

The Eurobarometer is an instrument used by the European Commission to map public opinion in the European Union (EU). The standard Eurobarometer is based on about 1,000 face-to-face interviews per Member State and reports are published twice a year. Special Eurobarometer reports such as the above are based on in-depth thematic studies [2].

- The 2013 Special Eurobarometer used the same questions and addressed the same objectives as a previous one published in 2010 [3]. It aimed to:
- map the use of antibiotics in the EU: how often users took them, how they were obtained and why they were taken;
- measure how much the public knows about the effectiveness of antibiotics and the risks linked to their inappropriate use

- determine the impact of antibiotic awareness campaigns.

Encouraging findings are that the use of antibiotics has declined among respondents who reported having taken antibiotics in the last 12 months from 40% in 2009 to 35% in 2013; still there is a two-fold difference in this percentage among EU countries. The large majority of those who used antibiotics in the time covered by the survey got them from a healthcare provider but 3 % of users obtained them without prescription. Antimicrobial resistance represents a serious threat to public health and patient safety and is a worldwide problem [4].

The European Antibiotic Awareness Day (EAAD) is a European health initiative, coordinated by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) since 2008, which aims to provide a platform and support for national campaigns on the prudent use of antibiotics. The European Commission adopted an 'Action plan against the rising threats against Antimicrobial Resistance' in 2011 [5]. One important aim of the action plan is to conduct research about effective ways to fight antimicrobial resistance and to ensure that antimicrobials are used appropriately.

## \*Erratum:

The sentence 'Only slightly more than half of those polled (52%) could reply correctly that antibiotics are not\* effective against colds and influenza.' was corrected on 22 November 2013.

## References

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3. European Commission. Special Eurobarometer 338 'Antimicrobial resistance'. Survey commissioned by the Directorate-General for Health and Consumers and coordinated by the Directorate-General Communication ("Research and Political Analysis" Unit). 2010. Available from <http://>

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5. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Action plan Against the rising threats from Antimicrobial Resistance. Available from: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health\\_consumer/docs/communication\\_amr\\_2011\\_748\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/docs/communication_amr_2011_748_en.pdf)