

NHS: Honey, not antibiotics, is best way to treat coughs

By Ben Spencer
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PEOPLE suffering from a cough should drink honey and lemon rather than take antibiotics, official new health advice has declared.

It insists that drugs should not be the first line of treatment for coughs.

The advice, published today by NHS watchdog NICE and Public Health England, has been drawn up as part of the battle against superbugs.

Experts are increasingly worried that doctors too often dole out antibiotics for viral coughs and colds, for which they are rarely necessary. The over-use of these drugs means superbugs are evolving to resist treatment, making antibiotics useless against more serious infections.

The new draft guidelines, which are aimed at both GPs and patients, say antibiotics make little difference to cough symptoms.

Instead, patients should try honey or over-the-counter cough syrups. The advice will undergo one month's consultation before being sent to GPs.

Dr Tessa Lewis, of NICE, said: 'In the committee's view, taking a spoonful of honey or a honey and lemon drink is a good first step a person can take for self-treatment for a cough. Honey is a natural



remedy which has been tried and tested for generations. Some people really believe in its benefits.

'We believe it is one treatment option which could be used by people in the first instance to reduce cough. A trial suggests honey can reduce the severity and frequency of cough after a day but doesn't have a significant effect on sleep quality for parents and children.'

NICE cited a 2014 study of 568 people which found a 10g spoonful of honey significantly reduced the frequency and severity of coughs within a day. Dr Lewis stressed that babies under one year of age

should never be given honey because of the risk of infant botulism. But she added that most coughs can be dealt with without contacting a GP.

She said: 'If someone has a runny nose, sore throat and cough we would expect the cough to settle over two to three weeks and antibiotics are not needed.'

'If the cough is getting worse or the person feels very unwell or breathless then they would need to contact their GP.'

Dr Susan Hopkins, of Public Health England, said: 'Antibiotic resistance is a huge problem and we need to take action now.'

'Taking antibiotics when you don't need them puts you and your family at risk of developing infections which in turn cannot be easily treated.'

'These new guidelines will support GPs to reduce antibiotic prescriptions and we encourage patients to take their GPs' advice about self care.'

Professor Mark Baker, director of the centre for guidelines at NICE, said: 'We are keen to highlight that in most cases antibiotics will not be necessary to treat a cough.'

'We want people to be offered advice on alternatives that may help ease their symptoms.'

The Commons Science and Technology Committee reported in 2014 that GPs dole out antibiotics to 'placate' patients and the practice was fuelling a growth in antibiotic resistance.