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# Danger of haphazard antibiotic use

**PEOPLE** who have a cold often take antibiotics, whether a physician has prescribed them, or not. Regrettably, the haphazard use of antibiotics may lead to major health problems. The kidneys, the liver and bone marrow cells are endangered and the immune system's ability to fight microbes is gravely compromised. At the same time, microbes acquire immunity against various types of medication. In addition, the random use of antibiotics kills useful germs and bypasses the harmful ones. All these side effects are especially dangerous for pregnant women and infants.

Antibiotics destroy bacteria and micro-organisms and are used mainly in the treatment of infectious diseases. Microbes include, not only germs, but also viruses and fungus. Researchers say that though antibiotics kill germs, they have no effect on viruses.

Do antibiotics have an important role to play in the treatment of disease?

Researchers have reported that although antibiotics are a major factor in the treatment and cure of several diseases, they are a double-edged weapon. If used according to the doctor's instructions, they are effective, but if they are misused, they can expose a patient's life to grave danger. The fact is that many people who suffer from inflammation of the upper respiratory tract (cold and influenza) use antibiotics in a haphazard way, without consulting a doctor.

A field study conducted by a research team consisting of Dr Shehab el Anzi and Dr Hala Mahmoud of the pediatrics department of the Arar Hospital, Northern Area, Saudi Arabia, focused on finding out the real ratio of antibiotic use by one to 10-year-old children frequenting the hospital. Out of a total of 576 children treated at the hospital, 226 (or 39.2 per cent) were prescribed antibiotics by the doctor in the out-patient clinic. Forty per cent of the aforementioned total number were suffering from inflamma-

tion of the upper respiratory tract and did not need to use antibiotics, according to Dr Mahmoud, a researcher at the Cairo-based National Research Centre.

The study concluded that children aged five and older were more liable to suffer from inflammation of the upper respiratory tract compared to children younger than five years old, because they were going to the school and were more exposed to infection.

"Nevertheless, antibiotics are being prescribed for children younger than five years old, even though it is accepted that these antibiotics badly affect their immune system, now and in the future," said Dr Mahmoud. The study issued a recommendation to the government and the Ministry of Health to raise the awareness of physicians, especially pediatricians and of patients, through training courses and workshops, of the correct way to use antibiotics, with special emphasis on avoiding their use for virus infections so as not to expose a patient's life to serious harm.