

Resisting disinfectants

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Although often overlooked, the use of disinfectants can lead to antimicrobial resistance and this may exacerbate resistance to antibiotics. Here, we explain why all antimicrobial agents, including disinfectants, should be used prudently in a way that is guided by evidence.

We recommend that governments assure that in various relevant sectors professionals, in close cooperation with administrators, develop and implement policies to promote the prudent use of disinfectants.

In professional sectors, disinfectants should be applied according to evidence-based guidelines specifying when their use has a proven added value in preventing or controlling infection or damage, e.g., food spoilage.

Private individuals should only use chemical disinfectants when prescribed by a medical doctor or other qualified experts.

In line with international recommendations, health, cosmetic and aesthetic objectives should be pursued without the use of chemical disinfectants whenever possible. In many cases, regular and thorough cleaning with water and a detergent may suffice.

We further recommend setting up a robust surveillance system for monitoring the consumption of disinfectants and the development of resistance. Initially, this may be limited to human and veterinary health care sectors. There, the risk of resistance development seems to be greatest, and test facilities are amply available.

If the results suggest a need, surveillance may be extended to encompass other sectors. It may be wise to start at a national level, but to strive for international cooperation.

The antibiotic resistance surveillance at the European level, which is coordinated by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, may serve as an example. We expect that efforts to halt or even curb antibiotic resistance will benefit from also paying due attention to disinfectant resistance.

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