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THE SPECIFICS OF THE USE OF ANTIBACTERIAL DRUGS IN THE ELDERLY

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Abstract. Elderly patients represent one of the most pharmacologically vulnerable populations due to age-related physiological decline, comorbidities, and polypharmacy. The clinical use of antibacterial drugs in this group demands careful consideration of altered pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics, organ function, and drug–drug interactions. Age-related changes in renal and hepatic clearance, immune senescence, and increased susceptibility to adverse drug reactions complicate antibiotic selection and dosing. This paper explores the pharmacological specifics, therapeutic principles, and safety challenges of antibacterial therapy in elderly adults, emphasizing individualized treatment strategies based on renal function, drug metabolism, and infection severity. It further highlights the risk of antibiotic resistance, Clostridioides difficile infection, and toxicities unique to the geriatric population.

Keywords: elderly, antibacterial therapy, pharmacokinetics, renal function, antibiotic resistance, drug toxicity, pharmacology.

INTRODUCTION

The global demographic shift toward an aging population has transformed the landscape of clinical pharmacology. Elderly patients—commonly defined as individuals aged 65 years and older—represent an ever-growing proportion of those requiring antibacterial therapy for infections such as pneumonia, urinary tract infections, skin and soft tissue infections, and sepsis. However, antibiotic use in this population is fraught with complexity. The physiological processes of aging alter the absorption, distribution, metabolism, and excretion of drugs, significantly affecting both therapeutic efficacy and toxicity risk [1].

Furthermore, the elderly often present with multiple chronic diseases such as diabetes, chronic kidney disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and cardiovascular disorders, all of which can modify drug handling. Polypharmacy—the concurrent use of multiple medications—introduces the risk of drug interactions that may enhance toxicity or reduce antibiotic effectiveness. Thus, antibiotic therapy in geriatric patients is not simply a matter of following standard adult dosing but requires a nuanced understanding of the interplay between pharmacology, physiology, and pathology.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Aging induces predictable yet clinically significant pharmacokinetic alterations. Gastrointestinal absorption may be delayed due to decreased gastric acidity and motility, although total absorption is usually unchanged. Body composition changes—reduced lean body mass, increased adipose tissue, and decreased total body water—alter drug distribution volumes. As a result, hydrophilic antibiotics such as aminoglycosides achieve higher plasma concentrations, increasing nephrotoxicity risk, while lipophilic drugs like macrolides or fluoroquinolones accumulate in fatty tissues, prolonging half-lives.

Renal elimination is particularly affected. Glomerular filtration rate (GFR) declines by 1% per year after the age of 40, and tubular secretion also diminishes. Since most antibacterial agents, including beta-lactams, aminoglycosides, and fluoroquinolones, are excreted renally, dose adjustment

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according to estimated creatinine clearance (rather than serum creatinine alone) is essential. Hepatic metabolism is also impaired due to reduced liver mass and cytochrome P450 enzyme activity, affecting the clearance of macrolides, tetracyclines, and certain cephalosporins. These pharmacokinetic shifts necessitate both dose reduction and extended dosing intervals to avoid accumulation and toxicity [2].

Pharmacodynamically, the elderly may exhibit reduced receptor sensitivity and altered tissue perfusion, influencing antibiotic penetration into infected sites. Diminished immune response (immunosenescence) further reduces infection control, meaning that antibiotics often need to be administered longer or in higher concentrations—conditions that paradoxically increase the potential for adverse effects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Drug selection in elderly patients should be guided by infection type, microbial resistance patterns, organ function, and drug tolerability. Beta-lactam antibiotics (penicillins, cephalosporins, and carbapenems) remain first-line agents for many infections but can cause hypersensitivity reactions and, in high doses, neurotoxicity manifesting as confusion or seizures—especially in patients with renal impairment.

Aminoglycosides (gentamicin, amikacin, tobramycin) are effective for gram-negative infections but possess a narrow therapeutic index. Their accumulation in renal tissue and the inner ear leads to nephrotoxicity and irreversible ototoxicity. Therefore, serum drug monitoring and once-daily dosing protocols are strongly recommended in geriatric pharmacotherapy [3].

Fluoroquinolones (ciprofloxacin, levofloxacin, moxifloxacin) offer broad-spectrum activity and good tissue penetration but are associated with increased risk of tendinopathy, central nervous system disturbances (including delirium and seizures), and QT interval prolongation in elderly patients. They should be avoided in individuals with known cardiac arrhythmias or those receiving concurrent antiarrhythmic drugs.

Macrolides (erythromycin, clarithromycin, azithromycin) are valuable for respiratory tract infections but can inhibit cytochrome P450 enzymes, leading to dangerous interactions with commonly used cardiovascular drugs such as statins and calcium channel blockers. Tetracyclines and sulfonamides, though effective, must be used cautiously due to photosensitivity, crystalluria, and potential hyperkalemia when combined with angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors.

For urinary infections, nitrofurantoin remains a common choice but is contraindicated in severe renal impairment (creatinine clearance <60 mL/min) due to reduced efficacy and risk of pulmonary fibrosis or neuropathy in long-term use.

Elderly individuals experience a higher incidence and severity of antibiotic-related adverse effects than younger adults. Neurotoxicity is a frequent concern, manifesting as confusion, hallucinations, or seizures, especially with beta-lactams, fluoroquinolones, and imipenem. Age-related blood-brain barrier permeability exacerbates these effects. Nephrotoxicity, caused by aminoglycosides or vancomycin, is intensified by reduced renal reserve and concomitant use of diuretics or NSAIDs [4]. Hepatotoxicity may result from macrolides, rifampicin, or co-amoxiclav due to decreased hepatic clearance. Cardiotoxic effects, including QT prolongation and arrhythmias, are notable with fluoroquinolones and macrolides. Polypharmacy compounds these risks through pharmacodynamic synergy or competitive metabolism.

Additionally, Clostridioides difficile infection (CDI) represents a critical complication in elderly antibiotic users. Broad-spectrum agents such as clindamycin, cephalosporins, and fluoroquinolones

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disrupt intestinal microbiota, allowing C. difficile proliferation. CDI causes severe diarrhea, colitis, dehydration, and in severe cases, toxic megacolon — conditions that are often fatal in frail elderly individuals. Preventing CDI requires prudent antibiotic stewardship, use of probiotics, and infection control measures in healthcare facilities.

Frequent antibiotic exposure in the elderly, especially in nursing homes and long-term care facilities, fosters the emergence of multidrug-resistant organisms (MDROs) such as methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), extended-spectrum beta-lactamase (ESBL)-producing Enterobacteriaceae, and vancomycin-resistant Enterococci (VRE). These infections are difficult to treat and often require the use of last-resort agents like linezolid or carbapenems, which themselves carry serious toxicity profiles.

Misdiagnosis and overprescription further aggravate resistance patterns. For instance, asymptomatic bacteriuria in older women is frequently mistaken for urinary tract infection, leading to unnecessary antibiotic use. Hence, distinguishing colonization from infection through clinical and laboratory criteria is essential. Rational prescribing guided by microbiological culture results and local resistance data remains the cornerstone of effective geriatric antimicrobial therapy [5].

Effective antibacterial therapy in the elderly depends on rigorous pharmacovigilance. Regular monitoring of renal and hepatic function, serum drug levels, and adverse symptomatology is critical for maintaining therapeutic safety. Dose adjustments based on creatinine clearance (Cockcroft–Gault equation) should be routine. Clinicians should also consider the "start low, go slow" principle—initiating therapy at the lowest effective dose and titrating carefully.

Medication reconciliation is essential to avoid drug–drug interactions, especially in patients on anticoagulants, antihypertensives, or antidiabetic agents. Polypharmacy-related toxicity can often be prevented through interdisciplinary collaboration among physicians, pharmacists, and nurses. Patient education also plays a vital role, as cognitive impairment may hinder compliance, leading to under- or overdosing and therapeutic failure.

CONCLUSION

The pharmacological use of antibacterial drugs in elderly adults demands precision, vigilance, and individualized care. Age-related physiological decline alters the pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic profiles of nearly all antibiotics, magnifying both therapeutic challenges and risks. Appropriate antibiotic selection, dosage adjustment for renal and hepatic function, and monitoring for toxicity are fundamental to achieving optimal outcomes.

In elderly patients, the clinical objective is not merely to eradicate infection but to preserve functional capacity and quality of life while minimizing harm. Polypharmacy, comorbidity, and immunosenescence necessitate a holistic approach that integrates antimicrobial stewardship with comprehensive geriatric assessment. Future developments in geriatric pharmacology—such as the use of population pharmacokinetic modeling, therapeutic drug monitoring, and genomic markers of drug metabolism—promise to refine antibiotic therapy further, ensuring efficacy with reduced toxicity.

Ultimately, the prudent use of antibacterial drugs in the elderly exemplifies the broader principle of precision medicine: treatment tailored to physiology, not merely age. Knowledge, caution, and respect for the fragile balance of aging biology remain the clinician's best tools in navigating the complex interplay of infection, pharmacology, and human longevity.

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