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Antimicrobial Agents: Classification, Mechanisms, and Therapeutic Importance

Isabella Rossi*

Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Milan, Italy

***Corresponding author:** Isabella Rossi, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Milan, Italy;

E-mail: isabella.rossi@email.com

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Abstract

Antimicrobial agents are essential therapeutic substances used to prevent and treat infections caused by microorganisms such as bacteria, fungi, viruses, and parasites. They play a crucial role in modern medicine by reducing morbidity and mortality associated with infectious diseases. These agents function through various mechanisms, including inhibition of cell wall synthesis, disruption of cell membrane integrity, interference with protein or nucleic acid synthesis, and metabolic pathway inhibition. The widespread use—and sometimes misuse—of antimicrobial agents has contributed to the emergence of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), posing a global health challenge. This article provides an overview of antimicrobial agents, discussing their classification, mechanisms of action, clinical applications, and the growing concern of resistance, emphasizing the need for rational use and continued development of novel therapies.

***Keywords:** Antimicrobial agents, antibiotics, antifungals, antivirals, antimicrobial resistance, mechanism of action, infectious diseases*

Introduction

Antimicrobial agents have revolutionized healthcare by providing effective means to combat infectious diseases that were once major causes of global mortality. These agents encompass a wide range of compounds—both natural and synthetic—capable of inhibiting or killing microorganisms such as bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites. Their discovery marked a turning point in medical history, allowing for successful treatment of life-threatening infections and enabling advancements such as surgeries, organ transplantation, and immunosuppressive therapies.

Antimicrobial agents are classified based on their target organisms: antibiotics act on bacteria, antifungals treat fungal infections, antivirals combat viral pathogens, and antiparasitic drugs are used against protozoal and helminth infections. Within antibiotics, further classification is based on chemical structure, mode of action, or spectrum of activity. Mechanistically, antimicrobials interfere with vital cellular processes such as cell wall synthesis (β-lactams, glycopeptides), protein synthesis (aminoglycosides, tetracyclines,

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macrolides), nucleic acid replication (fluoroquinolones), and metabolic pathways (sulfonamides). Understanding these mechanisms is essential for selecting appropriate therapy and minimizing toxicity.

Despite their effectiveness, the global rise in antimicrobial resistance (AMR) threatens to undermine decades of medical progress. Misuse, overuse, and incorrect prescribing practices have contributed to the evolution of resistant strains, making many conventional treatments less effective. Resistant pathogens such as methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB), and carbapenem-resistant Enterobacterales (CRE) pose significant global health burdens. Addressing AMR requires multidisciplinary efforts, including rational prescribing, antimicrobial stewardship, surveillance programs, development of novel antimicrobial agents, and alternative therapies such as phage therapy and immunomodulators.

In clinical practice, antimicrobial agents must be selected based on infection type, pathogen susceptibility, patient factors, and pharmacokinetic-pharmacodynamic (PK/PD) principles. Advances in pharmaceutical technology have led to improved formulations, targeted delivery systems, and combination therapies that enhance efficacy while minimizing adverse effects. As infectious diseases continue to evolve, the development and responsible use of antimicrobial agents remain vital to safeguarding public health and supporting medical advancements.

Conclusion

Antimicrobial agents are indispensable tools in treating infectious diseases and maintaining global health. Their diverse mechanisms of action and wide-ranging applications have transformed modern medicine. However, the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance necessitates responsible use, continuous surveillance, and sustained research into new therapeutic strategies. Ensuring the effective use of antimicrobial agents while exploring innovative treatments will be essential in preserving their clinical value and combating future infectious challenges.

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