The Expert Committee endorsed the inclusion on the EML and EMLc of ceftriaxone or cefotaxime as first-choice option for use in suspected acute bacterial meningitis and of chloramphenicol, benzylpenicillin, ampicillin or amoxicillin as second-choice therapy, recognizing that the last three beta-lactams may be added as first-choice options in some countries for suspected acute bacterial meningitis in particular when Listeria is suspected. The Committee recommended the addition of meropenem to the EMLc for use in neonates as a second-choice option to treat suspected acute bacterial meningitis where resistant Gram-negative organisms are the common causative agents.

Background

Acute bacterial meningitis is a medical emergency requiring prompt administration of antibiotics that penetrate well into inflamed meninges. Because of the severity of this infection, evidence from randomized controlled trials (RCTs) is limited; recommendations for antimicrobials are driven largely by susceptibility patterns of the most common pathogens together with experimental work in animal models.

Summary of evidence

In a 2015 systematic review, chloramphenicol was compared with two penicillins, two cephalosporins and one tetracycline (5 RCTs; 1753 patients) (1). Chloramphenicol was associated with higher mortality than the other antibiotics (risk ratio (RR) 1.27; 95% confidence interval (CI) 1.01 to 1.59).
Guidelines

Rationale for antibiotic selection

Systematic review evidence suggests that chloramphenicol is associated with higher mortality than other antibiotics; it was therefore not proposed as a core antibiotic. Ampicillin, ceftriaxone and cefotaxime are proposed for multiple indications and are categorized as core, while aminoglycosides and vancomycin have more specific indications (e.g. by age or indication) and are therefore categorized as targeted, as are ceftazidime and meropenem.

Committee considerations

For common community-acquired infections, the main focus has been on empirical treatment choices that are broadly applicable in most countries. Generally, alternatives for use in case of allergy were not considered. The Committee considered the various antibiotics proposed in the application under the guiding principle of parsimony and selected first- and second-choice antibiotics for this indication for inclusion on the EML and/or EMLc. Ceftazidime, amikacin, gentamicin and vancomycin were excluded, because the Committee considered that these antibiotics have limited or no indications in community-acquired acute bacterial meningitis. The Committee recommended the inclusion of chloramphenicol as a second-choice option, particularly for epidemic bacterial meningitis. Recommended first- and second-choice antibiotics are reported above. The first-choice antibiotics are those generally recommended on the basis of available evidence and are usually narrow-spectrum agents.

EML recommendations: Bacterial meningitis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First choice</th>
<th>Second choice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cefotaxime</td>
<td>amoxicillin</td>
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<tr>
<td>ceftriaxone</td>
<td>ampicillin</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>benzylpenicillin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>chloramphenicol</td>
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