

Antibiotics Don't Help Colds and Flu, Could Hurt

As cold and flu season approaches, the public needs to know one simple truth: antibiotics don't work for a cold or the flu.

Antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses. And colds, flu, most coughs, bronchitis and sore throats are caused by viruses. Antibiotics don't touch viruses — never have, never will. And this isn't new information. It's a long-documented medical fact.

But tell that to parents seeking relief for a child's runny nose or to sick adults who can't miss another day of work. Recent research shows that most Americans have either missed the message about appropriate antibiotic use or they simply don't believe it. It's a case of mistaken popular belief winning out over fact. According to public opinion, there is a false perception that antibiotics cure everything.

Americans believe in the power of antibiotics so much that many patients go to the doctor expecting to get a prescription. And they do. Tens of millions of antibiotics prescribed in doctor's offices each year are for viral infections. Clearly, antibiotics are neither effective nor needed for virus-related illnesses.

Why, then, do doctors continue to prescribe them inappropriately? According to recent research, doctors say that they are often too pressured for time to engage in lengthy explanations with patients, or the parents, about why antibiotics won't work for viruses. Also, the diagnosis can be uncertain — as many symptoms for viral and bacterial infections are similar — so sending patients home with a prescription for antibiotics may be a “better safe than sorry” tactic. But, perhaps most interesting, doctors report that their patients often demand antibiotics.

The demand may be coming from people who remember receiving antibiotics before the issue of antibiotic resistance raised red flags about inappropriate usage. Medical research now tells us that taking antibiotics for viral infections contributes to the rise of antibiotic-resistant infections. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, antibiotic resistance already is one of the world's most pressing public health problems.

Sick individuals aren't the only people who can suffer the consequences. Families and entire communities feel the impact when disease-causing germs become resistant to antibiotics. The most obvious consequence of inappropriate antibiotic use is its effect on the sick patient. When antibiotics are used to treat children or adults with viral infections, they aren't getting the best care for their condition. A course of antibiotics won't fight the virus, make the patient feel better, yield a quicker recovery or keep others from getting sick.

A less obvious consequence of antibiotic overuse is the boost it gives to drug-resistant disease-causing bacteria. Over the last decade, almost every type of bacteria has become stronger and less responsive to antibiotic treatment when medically indicated. These

antibiotic-resistant bacteria can quickly spread to family members, school mates and co-workers — threatening the community with a new strain of infectious disease that is more difficult to cure and more expensive to treat.

The first step toward reversing this problem is to build public knowledge and awareness of when antibiotics work — and when they don't. Americans need to know that the pills that seem to help can actually hurt when taken inappropriately. Antibiotics are wonderfully effective medications when taken for the right reasons. But using them when they are not needed increases everyone's risk of catching a super-bug this cold and flu season.

Americans of all ages can lower their risk. Parents should start by talking to their children's doctors about appropriate antibiotic use and following their orders — for the health of their children, as well as their own.

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