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NAVIGATING YOUR HEALTH CARE SERIES



APPROPRIATE USE OF ANTIBIOTICS



ANTIBIOTIC OVERUSE IS A PRESSING PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), at least **47 million unnecessary antibiotic prescriptions** are written in doctors' offices and emergency departments in the United States each year.

With research suggesting that doctors often receive higher marks on patient satisfaction surveys when they prescribe antibiotics, many doctors feel pressure to prescribe antibiotics despite their best clinical judgement.

Commonly used antibiotics that used to work well against certain illnesses are no longer effective, causing the CDC to call antibiotic resistance **"one of the world's most pressing public health problems."** Overuse of common antibiotics often leads to resistant bacteria that require higher doses of medicine or force the doctor to switch to newer antibiotics usually reserved for only the most severe infections.

In order to address the public health problem of overuse of antibiotics, it is important that we first understand appropriate use and some common misconceptions about antibiotic use.

Antibiotics may not be appropriate for many common infections.

Many of the most common illnesses in children and adults do not respond to antibiotics. Antibiotics will not cure or shorten the duration of illnesses such as colds, flu and most sore throats that are caused by viruses. Antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses. In fact, the majority of cold and flu cases do not require a prescription and will typically go away on their own with time and proper self-care at home that includes resting and increasing fluids. If cold and flu symptoms persist longer than a week, the doctor may order lab tests to determine if a bacterial infection has developed.

Acute bronchitis, often referred to as a "chest cold", is one of the most common types of respiratory tract infections, often causing a nagging cough. Antibiotics are not effective for most cases of bronchitis caused by viruses. Another respiratory infection, sinusitis, can cause a stuffy nose and pain in the face. Sinusitis also does not usually require an antibiotic.

In contrast, many cases of pneumonia (lung infection), bladder, kidney, and skin infections are caused by bacteria. Bacterial infections do require antibiotic therapy. However, many strains of the bacteria that cause these infections are becoming antibiotic resistant, and common antibiotics are no longer effective against those resistant strains. This makes the choice of antibiotic for bacterial infections more challenging for doctors.

Antibiotics have the potential to cause more harm than good.

According to the CDC, adverse reactions from antibiotics cause one out of five medication-related visits to the emergency department. Common side effects that may require a second visit to the doctor include rash, nausea, diarrhea, and yeast infections. Antibiotics may also cause severe life-threatening allergic reactions. Thus, the practice of giving unnecessary antibiotic prescriptions may conflict with the Hippocratic Oath taken by doctors to "first, do no harm."



Tips to Prevent Bacterial Antibiotic Resistance

So what do you do if you or your child gets sick? Here are some ways you can help prevent antibiotic resistance.

- Tell your doctor that you are concerned about antibiotic resistance and potential side effects of medicines.
- Ask how you may feel better without using antibiotics and what to do if symptoms do not get better within a specified length of time or get worse.
- If you do need an antibiotic, take it exactly as directed by your doctor.
- Safely throw away any unused medicines.
- Never save antibiotics for the next time that you become sick.
- Do not take antibiotics prescribed for someone else.
- Never demand antibiotics if your doctor says you do not need them.

The best advice is to check with your doctor if you are unsure that you or your child needs medical treatment. Your doctor will be able to advise you on how to best relieve your symptoms even if antibiotics will not treat your illness.

The human body has an amazing ability to heal itself with a little rest and self-care. Letting the body heal itself without unnecessary antibiotic therapy is the best way to make sure that antibiotics will continue to work when they are needed.

Trusted information and resources for patients and healthcare providers regarding the appropriate use of antibiotics can be found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use/community/for-patients/index.html>