

On Call: A Patient Education Feature

Resistant Organisms

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People are dying from antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and these unfortunate people are not just the sick and decrepit. In October 2007, three healthy children from the East Coast died from unstoppable infections. Recent studies show more people are dying in the United States from antibiotic-resistant bacteria than from AIDS. That's an eye-opening statistic, and it is a real crisis that springs from too much of a good thing.

The resistance is due to excessive overuse of antibiotics – drugs that are often incorrectly seen as the cure for whatever ails us. The most glaring example is when antibiotics are prescribed for what is obviously the common cold. These drugs make absolutely no difference in the course of the illness. Further, studies show antibiotics do not prevent pneumonia that can follow a common cold.

So why are we overusing antibiotics? Certainly, an effective sales effort by the pharmaceutical industry is part of it, but what is likely more to blame is the response of a physician to a patient or parent's expectation or request for an antibiotic. One study showed that 65 percent of the time children receive antibiotics if the doctor perceives that the parents expect them to be prescribed, but only 12 percent of the time when antibiotics are not expected.

There is another huge reason for growing antibiotic resistance, and it comes from an unexpected source. Antibiotics are regularly added to animal and poultry feed in an effort to boost growth and profits, and, as a result, resistance to these antibiotics matriculates to us through the food we eat. What's worse, even the animals are now ingesting the newer broader-spectrum antibiotics.



The good news is that in countries where fewer antibiotics, in general, are used, and where fewer broad-spectrum antibiotics are used, these drugs regain their effectiveness in just a few years' time.

There is something very important you can do. First, never push your doctor for an antibiotic. Make it clear you

would be happy without the stuff unless it is necessary.

Second, please push your grocery store and your restaurant for antibiotic-free meat. If we are willing to pay more for antibiotic-free products, farmers will provide them.

By avoiding the overuse of antibiotics, we can save ourselves from a real crisis.

Take-home message:

- 1) People are dying because of bacterial resistance to antibiotics induced by the overuse of antibiotics in people and animals.
- 2) Studies show antibiotics become effective again when used appropriately.
- 3) Never push your doctor for antibiotics.
- 4) Encourage grocery stores and restaurants to sell antibiotic-free meat.

"On Call" was developed by the South Dakota State University Cooperative Extension Service to provide health education to the general audience. Each month, this column will discuss a medical topic pertinent for people cared for by primary care physicians.

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