How you can stop the spread of antibiotic resistance

Posted 1 March 2020

It’s fair to say we have a complicated relationship with antibiotics. To start with, they are life-saving drugs which can destroy or slow down the growth of harmful bacteria in our bodies. They have added years to the average life span and made new medical procedures possible. But their continual use, and misuse, has led to an alarming trend of antibiotic resistance when treating common diseases. Currently, around 10-15% of all medical services result in the prescribing of antibiotics, and Australia is one of the worst offenders. In other countries, we see substantially less antibiotic use, with no detrimental effects t

So, what are the things we can do to make sure we are not abusing this life-saving treatment, and to prevent and control the spread of antibiotic resistance?

---

1. Save antibiotics for bacterial infections

You've been trying to shake that scratchy throat and runny nose for weeks, but it just doesn't seem to budge. Heading to the doctor is a good move, but your body probably doesn't need antibiotics to overcome your illness.

"Antibiotics are only effective against bacteria, not viruses," says Professor David Gordon, Head of Microbiology and Infectious Diseases, College of Medicine and Public Health at Flinders University. "This means they have no effect on the common cold, or flu, and will not lessen the severity or duration of these."

If you have a virus, you are much better off getting some rest and keeping your fluids up than taking antibiotics. And it goes without saying, but, finishing off that old pack of antibiotics you have in the medicine cabinet is a bad idea on all levels.

2. Avoid broad-spectrum antibiotics

If you do require an antibiotic, then definitely take it – but Professor Gordon recommends you ask for a narrow spectrum antibiotic which will target the specific bacteria and infection that your body is fighting. This is much better for you, and the wider population, than treating a suspected disease with a broad-spectrum solution. This approach does require accurate medical diagnosis and laboratory identification of the bacteria. Also, use antibiotics for the shortest possible duration (rather than a lower dose over a longer period) as this is believed to lessen the chance of the bacteria becoming resistant to the antibiotics.

3. Practice good hygiene to prevent infection

Regularly washing hands, preparing food hygienically and avoiding close contact with sick people are all good ways to prevent infection, which in turn, reduces the need for antibiotics.

"Vaccinations are also a good strategy for disease prevention," says Professor Gordon. "We also see that travel spreads antibiotic resistant bacteria from person to person, and country to country. So, where possible, practice good hygiene and be careful eating uncooked foods in some countries."

What's being done behind the scenes?

In hospitals, nursing homes and GP clinics, there is a lot of effort being made around antibiotic control. In some circumstances, a doctor may not prescribe specific antibiotics unless they have approval from an

infection specialist, or senior doctor, to verify its need.

There is also a commitment to ongoing education to change the behaviour of Australians, and their expectations when they head to the doctor with a stubborn cold.

“There is an unequivocal association between antibiotic use and the development of antibiotic resistance,” says Professor Gordon. “And this is particularly problematic in cases where there are limited types of antibiotics available to treat specific diseases. For example, when treating urinary tract infections and some skin and wound infections, there are only a handful of available antibiotics, and the most commonly used ones are increasingly becoming less effective.”

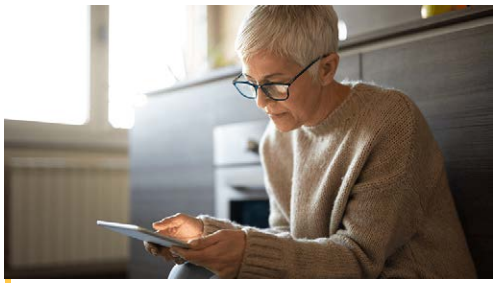
What this will mean is an increase in the cost and toxicity of the antibiotics we use. We will also become more reliant on intravenous (through the vein) antibiotics, rather than those we can take orally. To avoid this, Professor Gordon says the major target is to see a reduction in antibiotic use overall.

So, think twice before automatically reaching for antibiotics. Our future selves will thank you for it.

Other articles you might like

How to add...

We have all heard that fibre is very good for you, but why is this the case, and how can we get more fibre into our diet?

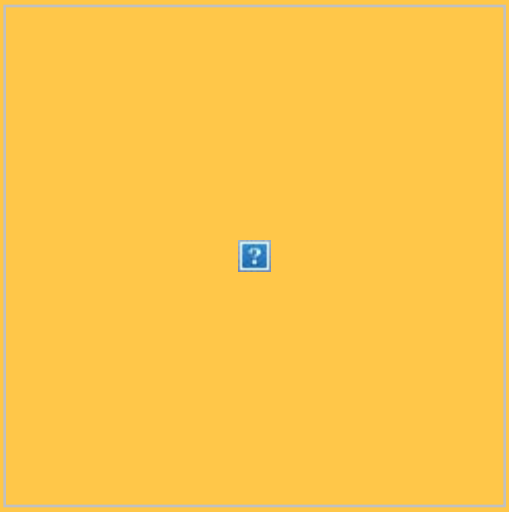


Flu Vaccine FAQs

The flu vaccination is the most effective way for preventing and stopping the flu from spreading. We answer some of the most commonly asked questions about the vaccine.

How to avoid...

While it can happen any time of year, you're more likely to catch the flu over the cooler months (April to October). To help keep you happy and healthy this flu season, we've put together 6 simple tips to give you the best chance of avoiding the flu this year.



We've Updated Our Privacy Policy

Health Partners is committed to providing quality and affordable health care; and we value our members and our obligation to protect your privacy. As a part of our responsibility in protecting your privacy, from time to time we review our policies to ensure we are meeting our obligations. We have recently made some updates to our Privacy Policy. Please click here to view the Health Partners Privacy Policy

Security Privacy Policy Terms & Conditions