

# Antibiotic resistance

## *The Health Column*

5 Nov  
2014

Did you know that prior to the invention of penicillin in 1929, a simple cut or graze could cause an infection resulting in amputation or death? The first antibiotics were prescribed in the late 1930s and since then antibiotics have become an essential part of our health system.

Antibiotics are medicines used to treat infections caused by bacteria.

Unfortunately many bacteria are now resistant to commonly used antibiotics. Infections caused by these antibiotic-resistant bacteria have become very difficult to treat. This is what is known as antibiotic resistance – when antibiotics can no longer cure bacterial infections – and has been a growing concern for years.

Wise use of antibiotics can help slow antibiotic resistance so that simple cuts and grazes can continue to be treated with ease. To ensure wise use of antibiotics, a key understanding is that the common cold and many other upper respiratory infections, as well as some ear infections, are caused by viruses, not bacteria.

If antibiotics are used too often for conditions they are unable to treat – like the common cold or other viral infections – they can stop working effectively against bacteria when really needed. International efforts over the past few years have resulted in fewer children receiving unnecessary antibiotics. But over-use, or inappropriate use, still remains a problem and continues to fuel an increase in antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

Antibiotic resistance is considered one of the world's most critical public health threats. It is also an economic burden on the healthcare system. Resistant infections cost more to treat and can prolong use of healthcare resources and decrease productivity.

As a nation, we need to be smart about when antibiotics are appropriate – that is, to fight bacterial infections. Taking antibiotics for viral infections, such as the common cold, most sore throats, acute bronchitis and many sinus or ear infections will not cure the infection. It will not keep other people from getting sick, and will not help you or your child feel better. They may cause unnecessary and harmful side effects.



It is important that everyone joins the fight to ensure antibiotics remain effective. Taking antibiotics when you or your children have a virus may do more harm than good. Rest, fluids, and over-the-counter products may be your or your child's best treatment option.

In the past, there was a feeling that unless a patient left a doctor's practice with an antibiotic prescription they felt they had been attended to poorly. That mindset has changed significantly. Consumers today are urged not to demand antibiotics when a doctor says they are not needed.

Effective treatment of symptoms is usually all that is necessary for upper respiratory tract infections such as the common cold. Choose products which are specific for your needs and ask your pharmacist to recommend appropriate symptomatic relief. For instance, the use of anti-inflammatory lozenges has been shown to be far more effective than antibiotics in relieving the symptoms of a sore throat.

Of course, you can also minimise the need for antibiotics with some simple and sensible lifestyle and behavioural strategies, by making sure your (and your children's and grandchildren's) immunisation schedule is up to date.

The problem of antibiotic resistance is so serious that the World Health Organization (WHO) has predicted a return towards the health problems of the pre-antibiotic era within a decade. This was a difficult time in health when safe surgical procedures were almost impossible, and when small cuts and grazes could lead to amputations. Your local pharmacy is your health destination. Talk to them about antibiotic resistance, avoiding infection, and treating common viruses. Many pharmacies also offer wound care services.

More advice about preventing or reducing the risk of infection can be obtained from pharmacies around Australia which provide the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information. You can get detailed information on antibiotics from the Self Care Fact Card titled *Antibiotics*.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.