



Health Matters

by Garey V. Ellis, M.D.

The Antibiotics Crisis

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), between six to eight million antibiotic prescriptions are written each year and, of these, more than 50 percent are unnecessary. The over-prescription of antibiotics has created a crisis of alarming proportions. Today, nearly all significant bacterial infections have become resistant to antibiotics.

For over fifty years, physicians have been routinely prescribing antibiotics to treat nearly every childhood illness from colds to sore throats to ear infections. To parents and members of the medical community, antibiotics were seen as the treatment of choice – a "magic bullet" that could be relied upon to cure childhood illnesses.

However, just the opposite turned out to be true. Not only did the antibiotics not cure the child's viral illness, but they also increased the number of

antibiotic resistant bacteria by tenfold. As a result, many childhood illnesses became hard to control without the use of more and more powerful (and more toxic) antibiotics, and even the more powerful antibiotics became ineffective over time.

There are times when antibiotics are the appropriate treatment. Antibiotics are effective against bacterial infections such as strep throat, some sinus infections, and the acute form of otitis media, an infection of the middle ear. In these cases, the CDC recommends taking a narrow spectrum antibiotic like penicillin that targets the specific bacteria rather than a broad-spectrum antibiotic like zithromax that kills a variety of bacteria.

Antibiotics are not effective against infections, colds, flu and sore throats that are viral in nature. With viral infections, reassurance, sympto-

matic therapy and follow-up—not antibiotics—are often the best solution.

Why are doctors prescribing so many antibiotics when they are not really necessary? Some doctors prescribe antibiotics "just in case" if they are unsure of a diagnosis and want to err on the side of safety. A busy office schedule, pressure from the insurance companies and fear of malpractice suits may also lead a doctor to prescribe antibiotics against his better judgment.

The number one reason, though, for the over-prescription of antibiotics is parental pressure. Parents don't want to miss work, they don't want to have their sick child keep the whole family up all night and they want a "quick fix." It is sometimes easier for a busy doctor to write a prescription for an antibiotic than to argue with anxious parents.

Parents should educate themselves in the appropriate use of antibiotics. They need to understand that many of their children's illnesses are viral and that antibiotics are not effective against viral infections and can even be harmful if given unnecessarily. Studies have shown that children who receive antibiotics within their first six months of birth have an increased risk of developing allergies by the age of 7. Antibiotics may also affect the gastrointestinal tract and alter the development of a child's immune system.

Reducing or eliminating unnecessary antibiotic prescriptions is extremely important. While it may not solve the antibiotic resistance crisis in the short term, it will go a long way to help resolve the problem in the future and will benefit our children's health in the present.

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sleep, poor concentration and behavior problems. If these symptoms are detected, parents should take their child to a qualified physician who specializes in pediatric allergies so that a proper diagnosis can be made. Early diagnosis and treatment at the right age, says Dr. Marcus, mean less medication later on. If allergy symptoms are ignored or undiagnosed, they will only worsen as time goes on and the allergic child will require more and stronger medication for a longer period of time.

If proper precautions are taken and appropriate treatment is begun promptly, allergic diseases in children can be successfully managed. And while it is not certain that taking these actions will stem the steep rise in children's allergies, it is clear that the lives of the individual children who are suffering will be made a great deal better.

RESOURCES

Books for Parents

- *American Academy of Pediatrics Guide to Your Child's Allergies and Asthma: Breathing Easy and Bring Up Healthy, Active Children.* Villard Books, 2000
- *Treating Asthma, Allergies and Food Sensitivities,* by Alan Pressman, Herbert, D. Goodman, Rachele Bernadette Nones. Berkley Pub Group, 1997
- *Children with Asthma: A Manual for Parents.* by Thomas F. Plaut. Pedipress, 1998
- *Family Guide to Asthma and Allergie,* by American Lung Association Asthma Advisory Group with Norm H. Edelman. Little, Brown, 1997
- *What Your Doctor May Not Tell You about Children's Allergies and Asthma: Simple Steps to Help Stop Attacks and Improve Your Child's Health,* by Paul Ehrlich and Larry Chiaramont. Warner Books, 2003

Books for Children

- *The ABC'S of Asthma: An Asthma Alphabet Book For Kids of All Ages,* by Kim Gosselin; JayJo Books. 1998
- *The Lion Who Had Asthma,* by Jonathan London, Nadine Bernard Westcott (illustrator). A. Whitman & Co., 1997
- *One, Two, Three, Ah Choo!* by Marjorie Allen. Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980
- *I'm Tougher Than Asthma,* by Alden Carter and Siri M. Carter. Whitman, 1996
- *Aaron's Awful Allergies,* by Troon Harrison. Kids Can Press, 1998
- *Taking Food Allergies to School,* by Ellen Weiner and Moss Freedman. JayJo Books, 1999
- *The Peanut Butter Jam,* by Elizabeth Sussman Nassau and Margaret J Oyt. Health Press, 2001
- *No Nuts for Me,* by Aaron Zevy and Susan Tebbutt. Tumbleweed Press, 1996
- *Allie the Allergic Elephant: A Children's Story of Peanut Allergies,* by Nicole Smith. Jungle Communications, Inc., 2002
- *Zoey and the Zones: A Story for Children with Asthma,* by Shawn R. McCormick and Nathan Schmidt. HealthSprings, 2002
- *ZooAllergy: A Fun Story About Allergy & Asthma Triggers,* by Kim Gosselin and Terry Ravanelli. JayJo Books. 1996

Other Resources

The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network
www.foodallergy.org

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
<http://www.aafa.org/kidsandteens/>

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, & Immunology
611 East Wells Street
Milwaukee, WI 53202
Phone: (414) 272-6071
<http://www.aaaai.org>

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA)
1233 20th Street, NW, Suite 402
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-466-7643
<http://www.aafa.org>

American Lung Association
1740 Broadway, NY 10019
1-800-LUNG-USA (1-800-586-4872)
<http://www.lungusa.org>
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/public/lung/index.htm>

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