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Use antibiotics wisely, public health experts urge

Nov. 14-20 is National 'Get Smart About Antibiotics Week'

As we enter cold and flu season, it's important to be aware of the correct use of antibiotics, caution public health experts.

"If you have a cold or the flu, antibiotics won't work for you," said Ann Thomas, M.D., of the Oregon Health Authority's Public Health Division.

This is the simple message being passed from nursing, pharmacy and physician assistant students and to children in 21 Oregon school districts.

The campaign is part of an innovative collaboration between six Oregon health professional schools and the Oregon Alliance Working for Antibiotic Resistance Education (AWARE). Thomas is medical director for AWARE, a statewide coalition promoting the appropriate use of antibiotics.

So what's the problem with taking antibiotics when they're not needed? According to Thomas, a few facts sum up the reasons to worry about overuse of antibiotics:

- It's estimated that more than half of antibiotics prescribed for respiratory illnesses like coughs and colds are unnecessary. Antibiotics kill bacteria, not the viruses that cause colds and flu.
- Taking antibiotics when you don't need them or not as prescribed increases your risk of getting an infection later that resists effective antibiotic treatment.
- Side effects to antibiotics are another drawback; allergic reactions to antibiotics, such as rash and anaphylaxis, send thousands of patients to the emergency room yearly.

By teaching students who are just starting their health care careers about appropriate antibiotic use – students who then pass this knowledge on to school children using games and activities designed for children in kindergarten through sixth grades – AWARE is training both health care providers and consumers about the hazards of inappropriate use.

For consumers who are concerned about preventing the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria and want to avoid health risks from the improper use of antibiotics, Oregon AWARE has three key messages:

- Don't pressure your clinician to prescribe antibiotics for viral infections such as colds or flu.
- If antibiotics are prescribed, take every dose – even if your symptoms improve. Not finishing the treatment contributes to the development of resistant bacteria.
- Never share antibiotics. Taking a prescription that isn't yours or using leftover antibiotics to try and treat an illness can cause adverse reactions.

The AWARE partnership includes physicians, health care providers, public health agencies, and representatives from higher education and community organizations. Founded in 2001 out of concern for the growing problem of antibiotic resistance, Oregon AWARE is one of 10 state and local programs coordinated through the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "Get Smart: Know When Antibiotics Work" campaign.

To find out what you can do to help promote the safe use of antibiotics and to learn more about Oregon AWARE, go to healthoregon.org/antibiotics or call 971-673-1100.

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