How to “Get Smart” About Antibiotics

COMMUNITY MATTERS
By Allison Linville

The CDC has launched a campaign called “Get Smart” to combat the overuse of antibiotics and the growing national health risk of antibiotic resistance. In the spring of 2016, North Valley Hospital joined in the campaign to raise awareness about the appropriate use of antibiotics, and how each of us can help reduce the risk of antibiotic resistant bacteria in our community.

We all hate being sick or having a cold, but antibiotics are not always the answer. Patients often request antibiotics for an illness or infection, even though antibiotics are not going to help them to get better. This contributes to bacteria becoming resistant to these essential medications. The “Get Smart” campaign reminds us that, “If you have a cold or flu, antibiotics won’t work for you.” This phrase simply summarizes the fact that sore throats (except strep throat) and runny noses are caused by viruses, not bacteria, and therefore antibiotics are not effective.

Antibiotics can also lead to side effects, such as diarrhea or an upset stomach. Some side effects can be quite serious, or even deadly. One example of this is the rising incidence of Clostridium difficile (C. difficile or C. diff) infections. C Diff is typically kept in check by healthy bacteria in your body. But, antibiotics wipe out both healthy and unhealthy bacteria in your body, allowing C Diff to rise up and cause life-threatening diarrhea. In the past, most C. difficile infections were connected to a recent hospital stay, but new studies show that children in the general community – without a recent hospital stay – account for as many as seven out of 10 pediatric C. difficile infections. Many children who get sick with C. difficile have recently been treated with antibiotics for a respiratory infection — infections that are usually caused by viruses and therefore not even helped by the antibiotics.

Montana is in a good place for combating antibiotic resistance before it starts. While 50 percent of antibiotics prescribed nationwide are unnecessary or inappropriate, Montana has one of the lowest rates of
unnecessary antibiotic prescription in the country. This positions Montanans to be active in the campaign against antibiotic resistance and to have an impact on the problem before it becomes an overwhelming threat.

Dr. Jason Cohen, Chief Medical Officer at North Valley Hospital, recognizes the opportunity to prevent antibiotic resistance here before it becomes a larger problem. "We are fortunate to have primary care providers in Montana that understand the threat of antibiotic resistance, and the proper role of antibiotics," he explains. "Patients can support this critical effort by not requesting antibiotics from their doctors and by limiting their family's use of unnecessary medications."

It is critical to understand that there are important reasons your physician may not prescribe antibiotics and that many illnesses cannot be treated with antibiotics. It's important to maintain open communication with your healthcare provider about the best way to care for yourself or your child when ill, and only use antibiotics when prescribed by your doctor. You can also ask your doctor for more information about the Get Smart campaign, or go to: cdc.gov/getsmart.

Jason Cohen, MD, is board certified in internal medicine and is the Chief Medical Officer at North Valley Hospital in Whitefish.  MW