

Health experts urge supermarket pharmacies to 'get smart' about free antibiotics

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As influenza season shifts into high gear, with 24 states now reporting widespread activity, the nation's infectious diseases experts are urging supermarket pharmacies with free-antibiotics promotions to educate their customers on when antibiotics are the right prescription—and when they can do more harm than good.

Several grocery store chains nationwide began offering free antibiotics this winter. Some are linking the promotion to cold and flu season, despite the fact that antibiotics do not work against these viral illnesses. Furthermore, antibiotics can have serious side effects, and their misuse is contributing to the increase in antibiotic-resistant infections such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA).

Therefore, the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have written to supermarkets with free-antibiotics promotions asking them to join "Get Smart: Know When Antibiotics Work," a campaign from CDC to educate consumers about the importance of using antibiotics appropriately.

"Taking an antibiotic when you don't need it won't help you, and may in fact do more harm than good," said IDSA President Anne Gershon, MD. "At a time when antibiotic overuse is helping to create drug-resistant superbugs such as MRSA and few new antibiotics are being developed, supermarkets need to be responsible in how they promote antibiotics."

Studies show many people believe that antibiotics can cure a cold or the flu, and tend to ask or pressure their clinicians to provide them. Every year, tens of thousands of people are prescribed antibiotics for these conditions, even though they will do no good and can be harmful. A recent study in *Clinical Infectious Diseases* estimates that antibiotics are responsible for 142,000 emergency department visits each year, mostly because of allergic reactions.

"Supermarkets have the power to protect their customers' health," said Lauri Hicks, DO, medical director of CDC's "Get Smart" program. "If they sought to educate people about when antibiotics work and when they don't, they would be doing a great public service."

In letters to Wegmans, ShopRite, Stop and Shop, and Giant, IDSA and CDC suggest that supermarkets could begin with CDC's easy-to-understand posters, brochures, and other educational materials.

IDSA suggests supermarkets offer free flu shots rather than free antibiotics as a way to save customers money while protecting their health. "We applaud supermarkets' desire to look out for their customers in these difficult economic times," Dr. Gershon said. "As flu season heats up, free influenza vaccinations would be a proven-effective way to keep customers healthy."

Source: Infectious Diseases Society of America

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