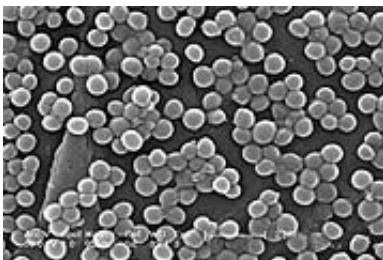


Many Americans still in the dark about antibiotic resistance

November 13 2012, by Amanda Gardner, Healthday Reporter



Electron micrograph of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria. Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Poll found misconceptions linger about what it means, how it happens.

(HealthDay)—Americans are not as smart about antibiotics and antibiotic resistance as they should be, a new poll shows.

For instance, although almost 90 percent of Americans know that [antibiotics](#) are effective for treating bacterial infections, more than a third also erroneously believed the drugs can fight [viral infections](#) such as the [common cold](#) or the flu.

"It's a common [misperception](#) that antibiotics can cure the common cold, and unnecessary [overuse of antibiotics](#) for illnesses like colds is dumping fuel on a wildfire of resistance," said Dr. Lauri Hicks, medical director of the "Get Smart: Know When Antibiotics Work" program at the U.S.

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.](#)

The number of antibiotic-resistant "[superbugs](#)" is soaring. In 2005, almost 370,000 Americans were hospitalized with methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), up from only about 2,000 in 1993. [MRSA](#) and other drug-resistant infections kill about 60,000 people every year in the United States, and add up to untold days spent in the hospital and billions of dollars in [health care costs](#), according to the CDC.

The new poll, which surveyed 1,000 adults by phone and more in focus groups, was conducted by The Pew Charitable Trusts in collaboration with the CDC and is being released as part of the CDC's "Get Smart About Antibiotics Week."

Only 25 percent of respondents had heard "a great deal" about [antibiotic resistance](#), one-third had heard a "fair amount" and a full 41 percent had heard very little or nothing at all.

But even among those who had heard about antibiotic resistance, many misperceptions surfaced during the course of the survey work.

For instance, even though the majority of respondents knew that unnecessary [use of antibiotics](#) could harm their health, less than half realized that this could also harm other members of the community.

Many participants wrongly believed that individuals build up tolerance to antibiotics, when it is the bacteria themselves that become resistant.

"They put it on the person rather than on the bacterium," said Jay Campbell, vice president of Hart Research Associates, which conducted the research. "It's not entirely clear to people that there's a huge community impact."

Eighty-six percent of Americans know that the full prescribed course of antibiotics should be finished even when symptoms have vanished, but many said they did not actually abide by this rule.

One expert said the news is not all bad, however.

"There is also good news," said Ramanan Laxminarayan, director of the Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics & Policy. The data indicates that antibiotic prescribing across the United States has dropped by 17 percent since 1999, even if the reductions have not been uniform. States like Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama and West Virginia have had the most modest declines or slight increases in antibiotic prescribing while states like Alaska, Hawaii and California have had significant declines in prescribing, Laxminarayan noted.

Still, there are clear strategies to help outwit the problem of resistance.

"The bad news is that antibiotic-resistant infections are increasing at an alarming rate and we are running out of treatment options for many infections," said Hicks. "The good news is that there are action steps that each one of us can take to stop spread of [resistant infections](#)."

First and foremost, consumers and doctors need to understand that antibiotics should only be used when they are really needed, she said.

When they are prescribed, people should use them responsibly, taking them exactly as directed, practicing good hygiene (especially frequent and thorough hand washing) and getting recommended vaccines, Hicks added.

This is especially important in light of the fact that few new antibiotics are coming down the pipeline.

"Finding safe, new antibiotics isn't easy, and new drug development is not keeping pace with the emergence of resistance," said Hicks. "We need to use antibiotics wisely, no matter what tools are in the pipeline."

More information: Find out how much you know about antibiotics by taking the [Antibiotics IQ](#) test.

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Citation: Many Americans still in the dark about antibiotic resistance (2012, November 13)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-11-americans-dark-antibiotic-resistance.html>

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