

## To Your Health!

By Judy Hargis, P.A., and Audeen Wagner



### ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE What's All the Fuss About?

In 1928 Sir Alexander Fleming discovered that colonies of bacterium Staph aureus could be destroyed by mold penicillium notatum. The importance of this discovery would later lead to the use of penicillin in the 1940s. It changed the practice of medicine, extended our lives, and led to treatments for illnesses and serious infections which were considered disabling or even fatal. Many antibiotics have been developed since that

discovery.

We have become dependent on antibiotics to treat everything. We all want to feel better. We often want a quick fix. We are quick to ask our healthcare provider for antibiotics when we feel ill. The problem is that antibiotics treat only bacterial infections. They cannot fight infections caused by viruses such as colds and the flu. In fact, they can be counterproductive when used inappropriately. When antibiotics are over-prescribed and over-used, they can be ineffective when we need them most. This is due to antibiotic resistance.

What is antibiotic resistance? It happens when bacteria are repeatedly exposed to the same antibiotics, or bacteria are left in your body after you have been taking an antibiotic because you have not taken the full course prescribed for your infection. These bacteria can multiply and become strong enough to resist the antibiotic in the future. The risk is that, when you really need an antibiotic, it may not be able to fight the bacteria it is supposed to kill, your infection may last longer, or become worse or even deadly. You can pass the resistant bacteria on to people you come into contact with and they may end up with an infection that is hard to treat. Every time you take an antibiotic that you don't need or you don't take all the an-

tibiotics prescribed for you, you increase the chance that someday you will get an illness that is caused by a resistant bacteria.

It is important that we all become aware of this problem and work to solve it. Health care providers can help by prescribing antibiotics appropriately and not giving in to patient pressure to prescribe them when it is not necessary. We can all be part of the solution by not taking antibiotics to treat infections like colds and flu, by using antibiotics only as directed by our health care provider, and not sharing antibiotics with others or saving them for future illnesses. It is important to be realistic in your expectations when visiting your provider for a sore throat, cold, earache or sinus trouble. It is estimated that up to 50 percent of prescriptions for antibiotics may be unnecessary.

There are organizations that are working hard to educate providers and patients about appropriate use of antibiotics. It is important that we all become part of the solution and educate ourselves about the consequences of not making changes in our use of antibiotics. We are all aware of some of the disabling and deadly infections that are a result of antibiotic resistance, such as MRSA.

Remember that most upper respiratory infections are caused primarily by viruses and do not require an antibiotic. Most virus infections improve with rest, fluids and symptom management. It is important to reduce the spread of cough and colds by frequent hand washing. Make sure that you wash your hands long enough to make a difference by singing your ABCs or the happy birthday song twice while you wash. Remember that all you need is good old-fashioned soap and water. There are lots of fancy antibacterial soaps on the market, but it is believed that their over-use plays a role in resistant bacteria, too.

The discovery and development of antibiotics was an amazing achievement, but antibiotic resistance has become a major public health challenge. Let's all be part of the solution!

Helpful Websites include: [www.healthoregon.org/antibiotics](http://www.healthoregon.org/antibiotics), (AWARE: The Oregon Alliance Working for Antibiotic Resistance Education) <http://www.apua.org> (Alliance for the prudent use of antibiotics).

Feel free to contact us at To Your Health, c/o The Independent. Or, email us at [health@the-independent.net](mailto:health@the-independent.net).

## State Public Health Division launches a new environmental tool

The Oregon Public Health Division announced the launch of a new tool to help examine the connections between envi-

ronmental hazards and disease. The Environmental Public Health Tracking (EPHT) network will, for the first time, pro-

vide access to environmental and health information for Oregon from a single source. This web-based data query system

is part of a national network led by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that will provide similar data for 17 states across the US.

"The evidence is mounting that pollutants in our air, water, soil and food have an impact on our health," said Gail R. Shibley, Administrator of the Office of Environmental Public Health in the Oregon Department of Human Services Public Health Division. "Protecting the health of Oregonians from negative environmental impacts is a top priority, and the EPHT network

will help us do that."

The Oregon EPHT network tracks key measures of environmental hazards, such as air and water quality, and also potentially related diseases, such as asthma and heart attacks. EPHT provides access to this information in a dynamic, web-based system that allows for the linkage of these measures for specific geographic areas in Oregon.

Momentum for a nationwide system like EPHT began in 2000, when the Pew Environmental Health Commission noted an "environmental health gap," a lack of basic information needed to document links between environmental hazards and disease. That observation came in part because the Commission found that the environmental public health system did not have the capability to respond adequately to environmental threats.

Since 2006, CDC has funded 17 states – including Oregon – and New York City to build state-based tracking networks.

For more information, go to [www.healthoregon.org/epepht](http://www.healthoregon.org/epepht).

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