

# YOUR GOOD HEALTH

## The DEADLY Dangers of antibiotic overuse

At least 30 percent of those prescribed in the U.S. aren't needed, the CDC says

By Encarcion Pyle  
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For decades, doctors and patients have overused, misused and abused antibiotics without much thought, but public health officials are warning that the practice is taking a dangerous, even deadly, toll.

"This is a crisis; people are dying," Dr. Joseph Gastaldo, an infectious disease physician at OhioHealth, said of the rising incidence of antibiotic-resistant infections and superbugs.

Left unchecked, more people will die, and previously treatable diseases could again become untreatable, Gastaldo said.

"We're already on the verge of having drug-resistant gonorrhea," he said, as an example.

There's no question that antibiotics are "wonderful, lifesaving drugs," Gastaldo said.

But because antibiotics can kill "friendly" germs in the body, their use also can have unintended consequences, including leading to other infections, hospitalization or even death.

Each year, at least 2 million people in the United States become infected with antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and at least 23,000 people die as a result, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Consider the case of a 32-year-old mother of two who shows up at the emergency room with appendicitis, said Debra Goff, an infectious disease specialist at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center.

The woman is given a single dose of antibiotics before surgery to prevent

bacterial infection, and upon discharge, two more prescriptions: one for pain medication, another for a 10-day course of antibiotics "just in case."

Five days later, the mother develops severe diarrhea, a common side effect of antibiotics, and by day eight she also has a high fever, acute abdominal distension and severe pain, Goff said. Emergency-room doctors determine she has an infection caused by a type of bacteria called *Clostridium difficile* or *C. diff.*, which can cause symptoms from diarrhea to life-threatening inflammation of the colon. She also is diagnosed with toxic megacolon, a dangerous widening of the large intestine.

"She is taken to the (operating room) and dies," Goff said. "Death from diarrhea? Every antibiotic carries the risk of *C. diff.* diarrhea, but this was actually preventable because the 10-day course of antibiotics was unnecessary."

People who take antibiotics are most at risk of acquiring *C. diff.* and potentially deadly diarrhea because these medications also wipe out "good" bacteria that protect a healthy person against the infection. Damage to the colon can cause bacteria to leak into the bloodstream.

Antibiotics have been inappropriately prescribed in cases like this for way too long, she said.

At least 30 percent of antibiotics prescribed in doctors' offices and emergency departments throughout the United States aren't needed, the CDC reports.

A majority are prescribed for respiratory conditions caused by viruses, which do not respond to antibiotics.



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### How to prevent antibiotic-resistant infections

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are many things health care consumers can do to protect themselves from antibiotic-resistant infections:

- Stay current on vaccinations
- Diligently wash their hands with soap and water whenever they go to public places where there are likely to be a lot of germs
- Don't take an antibiotic for a viral infection
- Don't take antibiotics prescribed for someone else. The antibiotic may not be right for everyone's illness. Taking the wrong medicine may delay correct treatment and allow bacteria to grow.

### If your health care professional prescribes an antibiotic for a bacterial infection:

- Do not skip doses
- Do not stop taking the antibiotics early unless your health care professional tells you to do so
- Do not save any of the antibiotics for the next time you or your child gets sick

"All antibiotics do is kill bacteria," Gastaldo said. "They don't relieve headaches, fever, nausea or any other symptoms of viral infections, and, in fact, could cause harm — when misused."

That's why patients should stop demanding them every time they get sick, Gastaldo said, and doctors should stop prescribing them before knowing if they're needed.

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