



National Prescribing Service Limited



MEDIA RELEASE

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Our antibiotic “addiction” is not helping our children fight their colds

Kids got a cold? Don't trouble your doctor.

The National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS) has a clear message for parents seeking to ease their child's cold by asking their doctor for antibiotics: don't bother, as antibiotics simply don't work for a common cold.

While it is a natural reaction for a worried parent to seek medicine for a sick child, Australians are among the highest users of antibiotics in the world – and peak prescribing is during “cold season” – August. NPS Executive Manager of Quality Use of Medicines (QUM) Programs, Karen Kaye, says, “Antibiotics don't work on the viruses which cause common colds, so asking for a script will not help your child.”

The Australian love affair with antibiotics is like few other nations on Earth. We are estimated to be among the highest users of antibiotics in the world, with about 22 million prescriptions dispensed by community pharmacies in 2006, but consider this: like all medicines, antibiotics can cause side-effects, including nausea, diarrhoea and indigestion. In women some antibiotics can also stop the contraceptive pill from working. What's more, the overuse of antibiotics is resulting in new strains of antimicrobial-resistant bacteria at a time when fewer new antibiotics are being discovered. This may have a profound effect on the health of future generations.

“When antibiotics were discovered they were a miracle cure and are still immensely popular – but because of the worldwide overuse of antibiotics, the World Health Organisation (WHO) says antibiotic resistance puts us at risk of returning to the horrors of the pre-antibiotic era, when scores of children and older people died of infectious diseases and major surgery was impossible because of the risk of infection,” Ms Kaye said.

“The best things parents can do for children with a cold virus is ensure the children rest, drink something soothing and are kept away from cigarette smoke,” Ms Kaye said.

Saline (salt water) sprays or drops for the nose or steam from the shower can help clear mucus. Common pain relief medicines such as children's paracetamol or ibuprofen can ease the pain however aspirin is not suitable for children. While decongestants for the nose work for some adults, there is not sufficient evidence to recommend using them for children under 12 years and they can cause serious side effects. Over-the-counter medicines for ‘cough and cold’ and ‘cold and flu’ are not recommended at all for use in children under 2 years.

Vitamins and minerals are often thought to assist with health and wellbeing. “It is important parents know there is not enough information from good quality clinical trials to show that vitamins and mineral supplements or herbal medicines help treat or prevent colds in children,” Ms Kaye said. “There is not enough evidence to prove their safety, and some can cause side effects. Parents may choose to experiment with their own health by taking supplements but this is not recommended for children.”

So when should you see your doctor? “Some serious diseases may initially appear like a cold virus or a ‘flu’ but may in fact require urgent medical attention,” Ms Kaye added. “Go to your doctor if symptoms come on suddenly, are severe or last longer than usual and also make sure your child's immunisations are up to date.”

The NPS *Common colds need common sense, not antibiotics* campaign is the only Australia-wide strategy aimed at reducing the development and spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Free resources for parents, children's services and primary schools are available at www.nps.org.au/commoncolds.

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The National Prescribing Service (NPS) is an independent, non-profit organisation for Quality Use of Medicines. We provide accurate, balanced, evidence-based information and services to help people choose if, when and how to use medicines to improve their health and wellbeing. We are member-based and work in partnership with health professionals, government, pharmaceutical industry and consumers. NPS is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.