



National Prescribing Service Limited

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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## **Got a cold? No pill will cure that ill**

Feeling lousy and dragging yourself to work each day? Do yourself a favour and stay home.

The winter “cold season” is the peak period for the prescribing of antibiotics – but asking your doctor for an antibiotic will not help you feel better. As part of the 2008 *Common colds need common sense, not antibiotics* campaign the National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS) has a clear message for anyone with a cold who wants an antibiotic: don't bother as they simply don't work for viruses.

Executive Manager of Quality Use of Medicines (QUM) Programs for NPS, Karen Kaye, said “Antibiotics only work on bacteria – they don't work on the viruses which cause common colds,” she said. “People who demand antibiotics from their GP mistakenly credit the medicine for their recovery when it was simply their body's immune system doing the work”.

“Also, if people take an antibiotic when they have a cold they are more likely to experience some unpleasant antibiotic side effects such as nausea, diarrhoea and indigestion. In women these side effects can also include thrush, and some antibiotics may stop the contraceptive pill from working properly,” Ms Kaye said.

Australians are estimated to be among the highest users of antibiotics in the world, with about 22 million prescriptions dispensed by community pharmacies in 2006. The result is 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 people died of infectious diseases and major surgery was impossible because of the risk of infection,” Ms Kaye said.

Many people also take vitamins, mineral supplements and other herbal remedies which claim to shorten or reduce the severity of cold symptoms. “The clinical evidence says it is unlikely that taking vitamin C supplements or zinc will assist in cold management or recovery,” Ms Kaye said. “There is some evidence that the top parts of *Echinacea purpurea*, a specific variety of the plant, may be effective for the early treatment of colds in adults, but the results are unreliable. The quality of echinacea products can differ greatly and most have not been tested in good quality clinical trials.”

She says that trial and error may be the only way to find a herbal and natural remedy that works for you, but not to spend too much money while you are experimenting.

“Don't forget that all medicines – including herbal and natural remedies – can cause unwanted side effects and may also interact with other medicines. Natural does not always equal safe,” she said.

If you are contemplating taking a medicine, weigh up the clinical evidence before you buy. Ask your pharmacist or doctor for advice and always read the label. If your symptoms are severe, come on suddenly or worsen, visit your doctor.

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. For more information visit [www.nps.org.au/commoncolds](http://www.nps.org.au/commoncolds).

**ENDS**

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**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.

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