

Antibiotics & Children. Friend or Foe?

By Claire Riendeau, N.D., N.M.D.

Today's research states that 2 out of 3 babies receive antibiotics by their first birthday. That statistic increases to 3 out of 4 by the time a child is two years old. There are many stories of young children, as well as adults, who get dosed with antibiotics repeatedly. Heartbreaking was an article about a 4-year old boy that had taken 18 courses of antibiotics in his short lifetime for recurring infections.

Antibiotic medication produced great excitement when it was introduced in the 1930s. Many thought it would be the cure for all infectious diseases. They are miraculous medicines when used judiciously, and certainly a 1st pick in life-threatening situations or when the bacteria has infected blood stream, bone, spinal cord, or other vital organs. However through a number of factors, including misuse and overuse in treating such ailments as colds and flus, many "bugs" have now developed defense mechanisms creating the emergence of new strains of "superbugs".

In January 2005, the CDC (Center for Disease Control & Prevention) released a series of public service announcements to raise awareness about proper antibiotic usage. The goal of this national campaign was to reverse public perceptions that 'antibiotics cure everything.' Is the overzealous doctor prescribing antibiotics too readily, or is the overanxious mother, whose child has an ear infection, pressuring the doctor into doing "something"! Maybe both.

Be informed when you face the decision to give antibiotics to your child or take them yourself. Know that with their use comes risk. The long list of potential side effects and diseases is described in the fine print when you pick up your prescription. Be sure to read it!

We all want our children to be vibrantly healthy and happy. Their immune systems function much like those of adults. The major exception, is that kids' immune systems are actively "learning" - that is, they are developing the acquired immunity, which allows them to fight off infections with a repeated exposure. Actively supporting your children through this learning process can ensure their immune system develops properly and stays strong. Whether we're discussing prevention or cure, some of these steps are the same.

Make sure your children are getting enough sleep. This repairs, rebuilds and regenerates cells damaged by bacteria and viruses. Newborns to toddlers should get from 12-14 hours and adolescents from 10-12 hours.

Breastfeed as long as you can, as it has been shown to decrease the incidence of diarrhea, blood infections, meningitis, asthma, respiratory illness and ear infections.

Feed your kids a balanced, whole food, preferably organic diet with a wide a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. These contain higher levels of the vitamins and minerals (compared to canned or frozen) required for an active immune system. The high fiber content found in whole foods increases the number of beneficial bacteria in the digestive tract and helps to protect against gastrointestinal and other chronic diseases.

Encourage your children to drink lots of purified/filtered water. Well-hydrated mucus membranes are plump and more resistant to infection.

Be sure physical activity is a part of your children's life- exercise & movement have been shown to decrease the incidence of chronic disease, obesity and cancer, and increase the body's ability to cope with stress and infection.

Give your children lots of love and attention. They need to be held, hugged, rocked, and kissed regularly. When they feel loved they are secure and happy, the better their immune system will function and the healthier they will be.

Don't smoke around your children. Kids exposed to secondhand smoke are more likely to suffer from recurrent respiratory and ear infections as well as asthma.

Despite your best efforts, if your child gets sick, take comfort in knowing that mild childhood infections are part of training the immune system. A cold virus kids catch today is one they won't catch tomorrow. It is important to remember that this is a natural process of growing up and not necessarily a bad thing as many parents fear.

If you've had to succumb to using antibiotics, remember they do not just go after the pathogenic or "bad" bacteria. They also indiscriminately destroy the beneficial bacteria necessary and vital to good health. Depleting these organisms can disrupt the balance of the body, suppress immunity, and lead to increased susceptibility to infections by fungi, bacteria, viruses and parasites. Additionally, when antibiotics are used excessively, depleting the beneficial bacteria, there may be an overgrowth

of yeast in the body, which can suppress immunity and may lead to recurrent infections. Discuss recolonization of beneficial bacteria with your doctor, as the types of organisms are age specific.

Antibiotic usage can adversely affect many nutrients, particularly the ones needed by the immune system to fight infection, such as vitamins A and C. Magnesium and zinc may become depleted with diarrhea, a common side effect of using antibiotics. Nutritional loss over a long period of time is debilitating for the body and sets up an environment for more infections.

Treating a child with antibiotics without correcting the cause will likely create a continuing cycle of repeat infections. Consider seeing a holistic practitioner and ruling out food allergies and environmental illness. Learn about the enormous influence that sugar, grains and dairy have on the immune system. Sweeteners, dyes, flavorings and other unnamed additives are found in both foods and antibiotics. Even tiny amounts of these additives can cause ongoing challenges for a sensitive child.

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