

“A Two Edged Sword”

Today’s column is a bit about something we take for granted, but also overuse and abuse to the point that soon its usefulness to us will be lessened or eliminated. I am speaking about the wonderful drugs we call “antibiotics.” Many of us don’t remember life without these drugs, and the fact that common infections from a cut, wound, etc. used to be life threatening. Penicillin, and all the others which have followed, have helped us to live healthier lives and even increased the span of human life. Yet, our reliance on these drugs, and their abuse and overuse, are leading to the fact that they are becoming less effective for us, at our own peril.

The reason why is the organisms they fight and kill are not stupid. They have an evolutionary ability to learn and adapt to defeat the antibiotic drugs that attack them. That is one reason why, in the United States, you don’t get regular old “penicillin” much anymore. It is usually some kind of “fortified” penicillin, or one of the other classes of these drugs that are even more advanced and effective at killing the host of bacteria and fungi that plague our world. These organisms are constantly learning, mutating, and finding ways to defeat our wonder drugs. And, the worrisome thing is – they are succeeding at that task very well. Soon, many of our commonly prescribed antibiotics will not be effective. And, although new ones are being developed, we may not be able to keep up at some point.

It is not uncommon for myself (and I am sure I speak for all my colleagues) to get phone messages such as....“I think I have a sinus infection, can you call me in a Z Pak?” While that is very convenient for you and saves you some time, you should realize that if you are sick enough to need a powerful prescription medicine, you need to be seen and evaluated by a professional, vital signs taken, and a good history and physical exam to assess your illness. Also, we need to know about your allergies, lest you have a serious reaction. Viruses, which cause many of our illnesses this time of year, are not affected by the usual antibiotics. But, if we prescribe anyway, we are only enabling bacteria and fungi to “see” these drugs again, and learn a little more how to defeat them.

Your immune system is a wonderful thing. Most of the time you do not “need” antibiotics if you will take care of yourself and try to manage symptoms and fight the bugs naturally. Then, your immune system is strengthened with each of these victories. So, try to avoid taking antibiotics unless you have sure signs of infection such as fever, elevated white blood cell count, or true evidence of infection such as a culture result or urinalysis to back up the need for these drugs. It will help us all.