

The Truth  *About Health*

Antibiotics Are Overprescribed For Sinus Infections

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Most patients with rhinosinusitis, usually called a sinus infection, are prescribed antibiotics by their doctors even though their problems are caused by a virus, not bacteria. Antibiotics do nothing to combat virus infections.

According to a new study published in the Archives of Otolaryngology, in the 4 years from 1999 to 2002, there were 14.28 million doctor visits for chronic rhinosinusitis and 3.12 million visits for acute rhinosinusitis. Chronic rhinosinusitis lasts three months or longer, while acute rhinosinusitis lasts for a month or less.

Over 80 percent of acute infections were treated with antibiotics, the study found, while 70 percent of chronic infections were prescribed antibiotics. This represents a fifth of all adults and one-tenth of all children who are prescribed antibiotics each year.

The findings are worrisome because this is yet another example of the overuse of antibiotics leading to more dangerous, drug-resistant bacteria.

“We don’t want to be using up our antibiotics on these people,” said Dr. Don Leopold, chair of the University of Nebraska Medical Center’s Department of Otolaryngology, in a news report on the findings. Dr. Leopold, who worked on the sinus study, said there are no approved drugs to treat sinus infections and no recommended course of treatment.

Looking To The Past For Safer Treatments

As well as breeding drug-resistant strains of bacteria, antibiotics can also have serious, even life-threatening, side effects.

For most sinus infections, Dr. Leopold suggested saline flushing as an alternate treatment. Saline flushes can be bought over-the-counter and are less expensive than prescription drugs.

“It’s a very old remedy, but something I think we physicians have forgotten,” Dr. Leopold said.

Other remedies for sinus problems have also proved safe and effective for many patients, including Chiropractic adjustments, Acupuncture treatments and nasal sprays containing herbal compounds such as xylitol.

SOURCES: Archives of Otolaryngology, March 2007;
<http://archotol.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/133/3/260>;
<http://apnews.myway.com/article/20070319/D8NVGKK81.html>