What You Need to Know About Antibiotics in a Nursing Home

What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are drugs used to treat infections caused by bacteria. They do not work for illnesses caused by viruses, like flu and most cases of bronchitis.

When are antibiotics necessary?

There are times when antibiotics are urgently needed; for example, to treat sepsis (e.g., when bacteria cause a severe infection of the bloodstream), pneumonia caused by bacteria, and meningitis caused by bacteria. Using antibiotics when they are not necessary increases the risk they will not work when needed most.

Can taking antibiotics be harmful?

Antibiotics, like any medications, can have minor side effects like upset stomach or a rash, as well as serious allergic reactions or dangerous interactions with other medications a person is taking. In particular, antibiotics put people at risk for a deadly type of diarrhea caused by *C. difficile.* Frequent or excessive use of antibiotics leads to developing bacteria that are resistant to those antibiotics. Antibiotic-resistant bacteria are harder to kill, and can cause untreatable infections. A person also can carry resistant bacteria without feeling sick (this is called "colonization"), but if that bacteria causes an infection, it can require more complex treatments and transfer to the hospital.

What is antibiotic stewardship?

Antibiotic stewardship refers to a set of commitments and actions designed to make sure patients receive the right dose, of the right antibiotic, for the right amount of time; and only when truly necessary. Improving antibiotic use will ensure these life-saving medications are effective and available when we need them.

Why is improving antibiotic prescribing practices important for nursing homes?

Nursing home residents have a higher risk of colonization with bacteria for many reasons. The presence of invasive devices such as urinary-catheters and feeding tubes, wounds, and conditions that affect the bladder (e.g., diabetes or stroke) can all lead to colonization. Difficulties in separating colonization of bacteria from true illness in frail or older adults can lead to the overuse of antibiotics, which in turn drives antibiotic resistance.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases

What can my nursing home do to improve antibiotic stewardship?

Nursing homes can implement the following:

- ▶ **Leadership commitment:** Demonstrate support and commitment to safe and appropriate antibiotic use.

- ▶ **Accountability:** Identify leaders who are responsible for promoting and overseeing antibiotic stewardship activities at the nursing home.

- ▶ **Drug expertise:** Establish access to individuals with experience or training in improving antibiotic use.

- ▶ **Action:** Take at least one new action to improve the way antibiotics are used in the facility.

- ▶ **Tracking:** Measure how antibiotics are used and the complications (e.g., *C. difficile* infections) from antibiotics in the facility.

- ▶ **Reporting:** Share information with healthcare providers and staff about how antibiotics are used in the facility.

- ▶ **Education:** Provide resources to healthcare providers, nursing staff, residents and families to learn about antibiotic resistance and opportunities for improving antibiotic use.

What can I do to improve use of antibiotics and prevent the spread of germs?

- ▶ Get smart about antibiotics by reviewing the information here and ask the right questions about any antibiotic prescription.

- ▶ Be informed about how your nursing home stops the spread of germs among residents and works to improve antibiotic prescribing practices.

- ▶ Protect yourself by getting vaccines for flu and pneumonia and encourage others around you to do the same.

- ▶ Avoid visiting when you feel ill to protect residents from germs which may be spread in the community.

- ▶ Insist nursing home staff and visitors always clean their hands before touching or caring for your wound or catheter.

- ▶ Know what else you can do to prevent the spread of germs (e.g., cover your cough).