

Antibiotic Resistance and its Impact on Persons Living With HIV/AIDS

For more than half a century, antibiotic drugs have ensured that potentially life-threatening bacterial infections are treatable. Today, however, more and more bacterial infections fail to respond to antibiotic treatment. A federal task force recently warned that antibiotic resistance is “a growing menace to all people” and concluded that if nothing is done, treatments for common infections will become “increasingly limited and expensive—and, in some cases, nonexistent.”

Antibiotic resistance poses a threat to everyone, but people living with HIV/AIDS are at particular risk. Approximately 900,000 persons in the U.S. are infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). HIV is a viral rather than bacterial disease, so antibiotics cannot be used to treat it directly. But because the virus disrupts the body's own disease-fighting immune system, antibiotics critical for treating patients infected with HIV. In addition, many of the therapies used to treat HIV suppress the body's own infection-fighting white blood cells. In those persons who do not receive effective treatment for the HIV virus, the virus generally leads to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). AIDS is a fatal disease characterized by numerous bacterial, viral and fungal infections, certain cancers, nutritional wasting and/or deterioration of the central nervous system. Although many HIV-related infections only occur in the advanced stages of the disease, bacterial infections can occur at any time.

Bacterial pneumonia and *Salmonella* foodborne infections are particularly common problems for AIDS patients. Bacterial pneumonia is often the first sign of HIV. When caused by penicillin-resistant bacteria, the mortality rate for AIDS patients is approximately 7.8 times higher compared to infections caused by bacteria that are fully or even partially sensitive to penicillin.

HIV-infected patients are also at greater risk of developing serious foodborne bacterial infections. In the 1980's, persistent infection with *Salmonella* was identified as one of the infections defining AIDS. Unlike healthy persons who usually require no therapy for *Salmonella*, AIDS patients need to take antibiotics daily to prevent recurrent infection of the bloodstream (septicemia). Several other bacterial infections also plague these patients. Worldwide, bacterial infections are a principal cause of death in AIDS patients, with antibiotic-resistant infections posing a particular threat. Protecting the efficacy of these antibiotic drugs is critical in maintaining treatment options for these infections in persons living with HIV/AIDS.

Although careful use of antibiotics can result in the emergence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, inappropriate use greatly accelerates this process. The more often bacteria are exposed to antibiotics, the more resistant they become. Because bacteria reproduce rapidly, these antibiotic-resistant bacteria can spread efficiently. Unlike higher organisms, bacteria can transfer DNA to other bacteria that are not their offspring, and even to members of completely unrelated bacterial species. In effect, bacteria can teach one another how to outwit antibiotics.

Antibiotic resistance carries a significant economic toll as well as a medical one. The congressional Office of Technology Assessment calculated that resistance in just six types of bacteria increased hospital treatment costs by \$1.3 billion as of 1995. Few new drugs are now in the pipeline, and any new antibiotics will be considerably more expensive than existing ones; the research and development costs for a new drug may top \$800 million, while prescription costs are likely to far exceed those for older, generic medicines.

Although the misuse of antibiotics in human medicine has been well publicized, less attention has been paid to the serious overuse of antibiotics in agriculture. By one estimate, 80 percent of all antibiotics and related drugs (antimicrobials) sold in the United States are used in livestock production. The lion's share—roughly 70 percent of the total—are fed to healthy farm animals to promote growth and prevent diseases that would otherwise result from the unsanitary conditions found in overcrowded agricultural facilities. About half of those drugs are identical or closely related to medicines used in treating humans.

Because of the growing health crisis of antibiotic resistance, which could render these “wonder drugs” useless in treating infections, the American Medical Association now opposes the routine feeding of antibiotics to healthy farm animals. The American College of Preventive Medicine, the American Public Health Association, and the World Health Organization have taken similar positions. A National Academy of Sciences report estimates that eliminating all such uses in poultry, cow, and swine production would cost U.S. consumers only about \$5 to \$10 per person annually.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has observed that “decreasing inappropriate antibiotic use is the best way to control resistance.” Key steps in doing so include adoption of policies aimed at ending the inappropriate use of antibiotics in agriculture, as well as continued implementation of programs to educate patients, parents and physicians about the need to use antibiotics more sparingly.

In particular:

- Congress should phase out the routine feeding of medically important antibiotics to healthy livestock and poultry and other inappropriate uses of vital antibiotics in agriculture. S. 2508, introduced by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, and H.R. 3804, introduced by Rep. Sherrod Brown, would accomplish these objectives.
- Producers and marketers of meat and poultry should voluntarily agree to stop selling or buying meat produced with routine feeding of antibiotics to healthy animals, and pharmaceutical companies should stop producing antibiotics for such use in animals.
- Finally, those who decide which meat products to purchase - whether an individual shopper buying a few pounds of meat during a weekly trip to the grocery store, or a food-service corporation that purchases millions of pounds in a single transaction - should select meat produced without the inappropriate use of antibiotics.

Unless we act now, we face a future of untreatable bacterial infections. Persons living with HIV/AIDS will be among the first to pay the price.

For a full report on antibiotic resistance and vulnerable groups, see www.keepantibioticsworking.com/vulnerable.