International Infection Prevention Week is an annual event with the purpose of educating health care workers, health care administrators, legislators and consumers about the importance of reducing the risk of infections. Held the third week of October each year, International Infection Prevention Week offers an opportunity to spread the word.

Health care associated infections, antibiotic resistant infections, yearly influenza outbreaks and the world wide concern over a “bird flu” pandemic have been hot topics in the news. As the saying goes, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Basic infection prevention principles can help prevent illness and save lives as well as money.

**The basics:**
Infections are caused when germs come in contact with body tissue or skin and cause harm. The outer surface of our skin is always in contact with germs, but when there is a cut, opening or irritation, germs are able to enter. Germs can also enter the body through the eyes, nose, mouth and anal or genital openings. When germs damage tissue, the body reacts by sending white blood cells and other immunity factors to destroy the germs. The area becomes warm and red and may swell or become painful. Internal tissues and organs can be damaged, reducing organ and tissue function or affect the blood causing a

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Some diseases are immune to the antibiotics we use and as a result, controlling them is more crucial than ever. Here are some measures every individual can take to help stop infection:

1. Wash your hands frequently—especially before preparing food, eating and after using the rest room. Insist that your health care providers wash their hands and use gloves.
2. Don’t insist that your physician give you antibiotics if you don’t need them. Antibiotics have no effect on illnesses caused by viruses.
3. Take prescribed antibiotics exactly as instructed; do not stop taking them without checking with your physician, even if the medicine makes you feel better—or worse.
4. Keep your immunizations up to date.
5. Follow safe sexual practices.
6. Don’t send your child to a day care center or to a school with symptoms of an infection—such as vomiting, diarrhea and/or fever.
7. Do not use I.V. drugs; if you do, DO NOT share needles.
8. Don’t share personal items such as razor blades, tooth brushes, combs and hairbrushes—and don’t eat or drink from others’ plates or glasses.
9. Keep kitchen surfaces clean, especially when preparing meat, chicken and fish; disinfect kitchen surfaces.
10. Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold, especially when left out for a long time.

Source: Association for Professionals in Infection control and Epidemiology, Inc.
Did you know?
• It is estimated that more people die annually in the US as a result of hospital acquired infections than from AIDS and breast cancer combined.
• Every year more than 2 million hospital patients in the US contract infections and nearly 100,000 die as a result, adding an estimated $28-30 billion to national health care spending.

systemic infection.

Germs are classified into different types: Bacterial, viral, fungi and protozoa. Treatment for infections can be different depending on the germ type. Germs are living organisms and, as such, have the ability to evolve and adapt to different environments in order to survive and grow. Some germs can live outside the body for long periods of time; others require a living host to survive. Some germs can live inside the body and not cause illness. Others can cause severe illness in susceptible hosts.

Health care-associated infections... as defined by the Centers for Disease Control, are: Infections that patients acquire during treatment for other conditions or that health care workers acquire while performing their duties in a health care setting. Specific criteria must be met in order to define an infection as health care-associated. In some states, hospitals are now being required to report certain hospital acquired infections (HAI). More than ever, invasive treatments are being used in the hospital. Combined with germs that are tough to treat due to antibiotic resistance, infection prevention is essential. Healthcare organizations are becoming more vigilant in instituting prevention measures and changing processes for care. Consumers are encouraged to insist that their health care providers wash their hands and use gloves.

Antibiotic Resistant Infections, AKA Bugs Behaving Badly as described by the U.S. News & World Report, are on the rise in hospitals and have found their way into the community. Bacteria are small, ingenious life forms that have mutated, under pressure from antibiotics, into toxic new strains. These new strains are tough to treat because antibiotics that have been used in the past are no longer effective. The combination of antibiotic over-use and fewer being developed has fueled the mutation and spread of the “bad bugs”.

Antibiotics only fight bacterial infections
Sometimes antibiotics are given unnecessarily for infections that they will not cure. Antibiotics do nothing to help viral illnesses like colds or influenza (flu). If you take an antibiotic when it is not necessary, such as for a cold, you increase the risk of developing and/or spreading an infection caused by antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

The solution to antibiotic resistance may well lie in more and better drugs. Drug companies have been slow to develop these, possibly due to the high development and marketing costs in comparison to return on investment. In the meantime, infection prevention measures and not overusing antibiotics is our best defense against the bad bugs.

Influenza, commonly known as the flu, is caused by viruses. The common or seasonal flu is a respiratory illness that infects the nose, throat and lungs. It is generally spread person to person by coughing, sneezing or touching infected body fluids to the eyes, nose or mouth. Respiratory etiquette (covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing), washing your hands and avoiding close contact with people who are sick will also help prevent infection. The flu season typically is in the winter months and can begin in October through March each year. An effective vaccine, when available, is the best safeguard for prevention. Anti-viral medications can also help those that are at most risk of becoming seriously ill. Some years the flu is worse than others, particularly when the vaccine is not as effective (because the viral strain was not accurately predicted beforehand) and/or the community has a lower resistance to the particular strain.

The Avian (or bird) flu is caused by influenza viruses that occur naturally among wild birds. The current virus can be transmitted from birds to humans. There has been a reported spread of infected birds and humans that have been infected by the birds. The bird flu is currently not
being transmitted person to person. There is currently no human immunity and no vaccine available.

Pandemic influenza is when a new, more virulent strain of influenza causes a global outbreak of serious illness. Because there is little immunity in the population, the disease can spread easily from person to person. Currently there is no pandemic flu, and the hope is that a vaccine can be developed and initiated. Possibly the use of anti-viral medications for those at high risk combined with infection prevention measures will help limit the spread of infection.

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