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Cold and Flu Season Arrives:

Antibiotics are not always the answer, warns health department

BREWSTER, NY— As the cold and flu season swings into full gear, visits to doctors' offices will undoubtedly rise. To receive the best care, patients as well as doctors should stay informed about proper use of antibiotics. Two studies this year have reported not only about the overuse of these medicines, but also frequent incorrect prescribing. These problems are a focal point of the campaign for the Get Smart About Antibiotics Week, from November 14 to 20, which calls attention to the increasing problem of antibiotic resistance. This phenomena occurs when bacteria evolve into "super bugs" that no longer respond to ordinary antibiotics.

"Antibiotics can't help a patient who has come down with the flu," explains Michael J. Nesheiwat, MD, Interim Commissioner of Health. "The flu is a viral infection. Antibiotics are only helpful with bacterial infections. People need to understand the difference."

This popular misconception is familiar to Dr. Nesheiwat. He has run a busy family medicine practice in Putnam County for the past 25 years. "Sometimes patients just want a prescription—something they think will make them better. This is why the health department has been helping physicians educate their patients by providing doctors with more information, posters and a new type of prescription pad. The pad gives physicians a place to check the appropriate diagnosis—cold, cough or

the flu, and clearly spells out the best medicines—simply fluids, saline nasal spray and throat spray.”

Older children or adults can also use lozenges for sore throat relief.

According to the New York State Department of Health, Putnam County’s overprescribing rates may be among the highest in the state. The state health department has identified Putnam as one of 11 counties with the uppermost rates of potentially avoidable antibiotic prescription—with 55 to 64 percent of adults filling a prescription after an upper respiratory infection diagnosis, such as a cough or cold. Most other counties fall in the lower two ranges, either 35 to 44 percent, or 45 to 54 percent.

Another problem on the rise is with prescribing the wrong antibiotic. An October 2016 report released from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Pew Charitable Trusts describes the pattern for ear and sinus infections, and sore throats. They found that only 52 percent of patients were given the recommended “first-line” medication. That leaves 48 percent getting a broad-spectrum antibiotic, which is not necessary and increases drug resistance. Surprisingly, adults are much more likely than children to receive the wrong antibiotic. The report found more than 60 percent of adults diagnosed with strep throat were prescribed an antibiotic not recommended by medical guidelines. Only 40 percent of children faced the same situation.

“The public health implications of this situation are huge and not confined to New York or even just the U.S,” continues Dr. Nesheiwat. “In fact, global health experts have warned that by the year 2020, super-bugs may kill more people than cancer kills today. These are truly scary numbers.

“Unfortunately, there isn’t a simple solution,” says Dr. Nesheiwat. “But we have to start with what we can do, and informing the public, as well as health care providers, is that first step.”

For more information about Get Smart About Antibiotics Week, visit: www.cdc.gov/getsmart

The Health Department’s mission is to improve and protect the health of the Putnam County community, composed of nearly 100,000 residents. Core services include community health assessment, disease surveillance and control, emergency preparedness, environmental health protection, family health promotion and health education. For more information, please visit the PCDOH website at www.putnamcountyny.com/health or visit the social media sites on Facebook at www.facebook.com/putnamhealth, and Twitter @PutnamHealthNY.