How to talk about antimicrobial resistance

Help everyone around you understand AMR

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) can be curbed. Raising awareness on the consequences of this global challenge empowers all of us to take the simple actions needed to address it. Because understanding a problem is the first step to solving it, effective communications on AMR are key to build a safer future for all. These guidelines will give you tips on how to talk about AMR to various audiences– from farmers to members of the civil society.

World Organisation for Animal Health
Founded as OIE

Framing and explaining antimicrobial resistance

What is the best way to explain antimicrobial resistance (AMR) in order to drive action? Whoever your audience is, whatever their science background or prior understanding of AMR, you can always rely on a few essentials to communicate effectively.

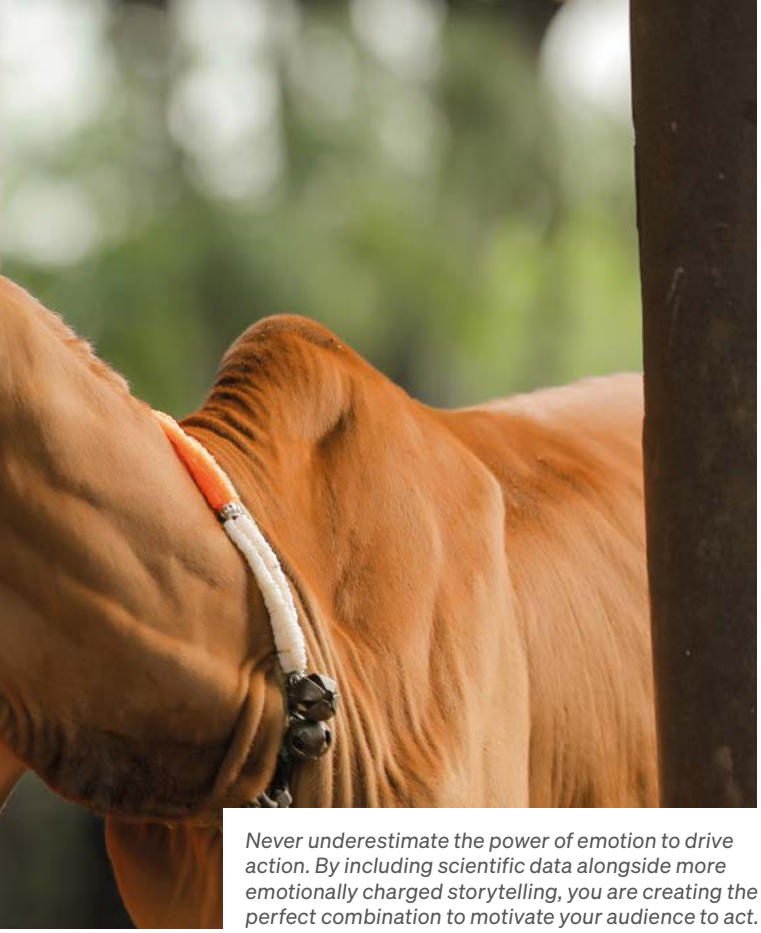
STEP 1

Always frame the issue

Framing the issue means providing your audience with the contextual information they need to understand **its scope.** To drive action, a message on antimicrobial resistance should necessarily stress that:

- antimicrobial resistance is having an impact **here and now;**
- antimicrobial resistance can affect **everyone;**
- antimicrobial resistance can be **curbed;**
- **everyone has a role to play in the fight against AMR.**

By stressing these points immediately, you are helping your audience grasp the scope and urgency of tackling antimicrobial resistance. You are making sure they feel concerned about it and understand they are a part of the solution. They will absorb any additional information more easily, because they feel involved.



Never underestimate the power of emotion to drive action. By including scientific data alongside more emotionally charged storytelling, you are creating the perfect combination to motivate your audience to act.

Effective communications: basic tips

→ **Choose one overarching message, and repeat it!** You should be able to formulate your key message in a short, simple sentence. Everything you say or write should serve this overarching message, including any secondary messages you may want to share.

→ **Use figures and data** to provide context and scale.

→ **Use real-life examples** to describe antimicrobial resistance, its causes and solutions. This fosters empathy, triggers your audience to connect to the ideas and helps them remember your message. Never neglect the power of emotions to drive action.

→ **Always use short sentences.** Enforce a "one sentence-one idea" rule.

→ **Steer clear of acronyms and systematically provide definitions** of technical and scientific words. Whenever you are writing, constantly ask yourself: "*Is this the simplest way to say this?*".

→ **In print and web productions, choose images to convey ideas and emotions.** Always caption these images and make sure they represent a reality close to your target audience so they can relate.

→ **Call your audience to precise actions** and tell them what their role is.

STEP 2

Explain the basics

Never assume your audience has prior knowledge of an issue. Even if you are talking to a scientist or to someone who has already heard of antimicrobial resistance, misconceptions are widespread in all communities (👉 *see pages 4-5 to learn how to deconstruct them*). For this reason, it is never a waste of time to cover the basics. This includes:

- **reminding your audience** what a microbe is;
- **describing how antimicrobials have shaped modern medicine,** to fight infections and improve global health and welfare;
- **explaining the emergence and spread of antimicrobial resistance** using our basic tips for effective communications;
- **stressing how precious antimicrobials** are for humans, animals and plants, and the dangers of losing their therapeutic efficacy in any of these sectors;
- **motivating your audience** to play a role in curbing antimicrobial resistance.

STEP 3

Consider your audience

Who are you speaking to? What is their level of understanding of the topic? What kind of language are they comfortable with? What motivates them? The more you adapt your message to your audience, the more receptive they will be to it. Try to personalise the examples you use to situations your audience knows well. For instance, when talking to a farmer, mention the impact of AMR on livestock and their livelihoods. When talking to a pet owner, mention their pets and the possible impacts of AMR on their health.

👉 browse our stakeholders infographic to find out who does what in the fight against AMR.

Let's give this a try!

Imagine you are trying to explain antimicrobial resistance to your grandmother, who seems shocked and upset because her veterinarian did not prescribe antibiotics to her sick cat. Here is how you could formulate your message:

Some illnesses are caused by microbes – tiny living things such as bacteria, fungi, viruses and parasites that cannot be seen with the naked eye. These illnesses can be fought off using antimicrobials, such as antibiotics. But this does not concern all illnesses! If you use antimicrobials when they are not needed, or if you use them incorrectly, you contribute to antimicrobial resistance. This is when microbes grow resistant to the drugs we use to combat them. It leads to the persistence of infections that were once treatable. As antimicrobial resistance rises all over the world, common illnesses like cystitis in humans and in pets like your cat could once again become very severe or even deadly. In your cat's case, after examining the animal and performing lab tests, the veterinarian made a logical choice in refusing to prescribe antibiotics, because they were not needed and alternative treatments that were equally efficient were available. His choice helps all of us fight antimicrobial resistance and, ultimately, saves lives.

Explain the basics, including the definition of microbes in this case.

Always give definitions for terms that may seem technical or scientific.

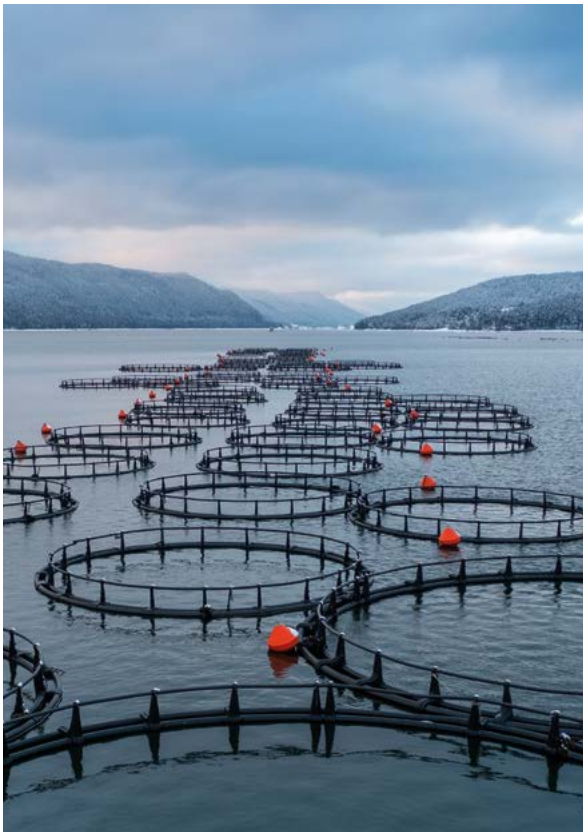
Involve your audience so they understand this issue concerns them here and now.

Choose an illness your audience is familiar with so they can fully relate.

Link individual stories to the larger picture. This helps your audience realise the impact of their actions.

Addressing misconceptions

Communicating effectively on antimicrobial resistance often means being confronted with widespread misconceptions on the topic. Debunking myths and misinformation helps create a clean slate for your audience to truly hear your message. And because you, as an animal health professional or authority, have verified knowledge on antimicrobial resistance, restoring the truth is your duty.



The fight against antimicrobial resistance strongly relies on making sure the correct information reaches all concerned audiences. This also means debunking common myths and misinformation on the topic and restoring the truth with tact and know-how.

"*Antimicrobial resistance is rising because of antimicrobial use in animals*". "*The animal sector keeps increasing its use of antimicrobials…*" Do these common misconceptions ring a bell? These affirmations mislead people on the causes of antimicrobial resistance, and on the solutions to its overwhelming spread. Because they hinder the fight against AMR, these myths should be addressed systematically. However, debunking the myths your audience believes in is not as simple as telling them they are wrong. You are attacking belief systems that have usually been built over the long term and cannot be overturned at the snap of a finger. How to proceed?

STEP 1

Acknowledging your audience

Your audience will listen to you if they feel you acknowledge them. Do not undermine or judge their misconceptions, nor adopt a dominant, patronising position. Telling fact from fiction is genuinely difficult in a world where fake news travel so quickly.

STEP 2

Help your audience consider the source

Misconceptions often stem from an unreliable source or from oversimplification. To debunk myths, you can encourage your audience to consider the source from which they got the information and truly question its relevance and authenticity. The context in which the information is given and the range to which it applies should also be considered.

STEP 3

Restore the truth with scientific facts

The way figures are used is another common source of misconceptions. Once more, invite your audience to dig a little deeper. A figure may have a specific range, or compare elements that overlook essential information on a topic or context, rendering it falsely significant. When debunking these myths, try to end your demonstration by opposing a different figure with a clear explanation that is relevant to the cultural and socioeconomic context of your audience.

The AMR true/false

Debunking myths is one thing; knowing the actual truth is another. So many false ideas are in circulation about antimicrobial resistance that it is often hard to tell truth from fiction. Find out what the most common misconceptions about AMR are, and what the truth actually is.

GENERAL MISCONCEPTIONS ON AMR

"Antimicrobial resistance is when humans or animals become resistant to antimicrobials."

FALSE

Antimicrobial resistance is when microbes grow resistant to the drugs that are supposed to combat them. These drugs are called antimicrobials. One of the main drivers of AMR is misuse and overuse of antimicrobials. This means that when we handle these drugs carelessly, they lose their efficacy and we lose the capacity to treat infections caused by microbes . Humans and animals do not actually grow resistant; microbes do.

"Antibiotics are effective against all infections."

FALSE

When used properly, antibiotics can treat bacterial infections, but not viral infections. For some bacterial infections, antimicrobials may not even be required because efficient alternatives are available.

"Once humans or animals no longer show clinical signs, an antimicrobial treatment can be stopped."

FALSE

You should always comply with the prescribed dosage and length of treatment when using antimicrobials according to the instructions provided by your doctor or animal health professional. It is not because a human or animal no longer shows clinical signs and appear "healthy" that they are cured. In fact, stopping a treatment beforehand can have negative consequences for human and animal health, such as recurrence of disease and development of AMR.

Spreading the word about antimicrobial resistance using the tips and know-how shared in these guidelines will have a concrete positive impact on animal, human and plant health worldwide.

AMR AND THE ANIMAL HEALTH SECTOR

"The animal health sector is responsible for antimicrobial resistance."

FALSE

Antimicrobial resistance cannot be attributed to just one sector. It is a cross-sectorial, One Health issue that originates from all sectors–as antimicrobials are used in humans, animals and plants–and therefore affects all of them. As human, animal and plant health are interconnected, solutions must arise from multisectoral cooperation.

To learn more about the One Health approach of AMR, browse our AMR portal.

"More antimicrobials are used in animals than in humans."

TRUE and **FALSE**

There are many more animals than humans on earth. Therefore, the global weight of animals is far higher than that of humans. It is hence logical that the total quantity of antimicrobials used in animals exceeds the quantity used in humans. If you really want to compare antimicrobial use in animals and humans, you should use biomass as a point of reference instead of global weight. Today, only a few countries in the world are applying this methodology to make fair estimations. And, in some cases, we can observe that the use of antimicrobials expressed in mg/kg in humans is higher than in animals. WOAH is working with its Quadripartite partners to expand this integrated analysis worldwide.

"The animal health sector uses a lot of antimicrobials that are critically important for humans."

TRUE and **FALSE**

While it is true that some antimicrobials that are important for humans have been used in the animal health sector in the past, this has evolved enormously over the years. The animal health sector has made considerable effort in reducing its use of critically important antimicrobials, as can be verified by data available for this sector. For instance, WOAH's Sixth annual report on antimicrobial use reveals a 62% decline in the use of polypetides and a 43% decline in the use of macrolides. Moreover, according to the same report, only 12% of Members still use antimicrobials listed as "highest priority critically important for human medicine" as growth promoters in animals. WOAH's List of antimicrobials of veterinary importance is a precious resource to guide professionals in their decisions.

To communicate effectively on antimicrobial resistance, update your knowledge on AMR.

Browse our portal on AMR.

Read our AMR factsheet.

Use antimicrobials with care.

Because animal health is our health, it's everyone's health.

World Organisation for Animal Health
Founded as OIE
www.woah.org

With the support of
The Fleming Fund
UKaid
from the British people