

ANTIBIOTICS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

You don't feel well. Your throat is sore and your nose is running. But your doctor won't prescribe an antibiotic. You're frustrated and maybe a little annoyed. It might surprise you to discover that the doctor did you a big favour by not prescribing an antibiotic!

First of all, while antibiotics are helpful drugs, they don't cure everything. Antibiotics kill bacteria and some parasites, but they don't work against viruses. Colds, the flu, and most sore throats are caused by viruses, so antibiotics won't cure them.

The chart below lists some common infections and shows which are caused by bacteria and which are caused by viruses.



Caused by Bacteria	Caused by Viruses
Bladder infections	Bronchitis
Many skin infections	Colds
Severe sinus infections that last longer than two weeks	Influenza (the flu)
Some ear infections	Most coughs
Some infected wounds	Most ear infections
Strep throat	Most sore throats
	Most cases of gastroenteritis (inflammation of the stomach and small intestine, sometimes called the stomach flu)

The Downside

If you think it might be a good idea to take an antibiotic anyway, just in case it might help a little, you'd be wrong. Taking an antibiotic you don't need won't help, and it can have serious consequences, such as:



- **Side effects:** All medications can cause side effects in some people, and taking a drug you don't need leaves you open to experiencing side effects without getting any benefit from the medicine. Antibiotics can cause nausea and diarrhea, and they can make you very sensitive to sunlight.
- **Other infections:** Antibiotics kill many of the good bacteria in the body along with the disease-causing bacteria. The body normally contains many different types of helpful bacteria, and they exist in a delicate balance. When too many of the good bacteria are killed off, the balance is upset, and this can lead to upset stomach, diarrhea, vaginal infections, swelling of the large intestines, and other problems.
- **Bacterial resistance:** Improper antibiotic use leads to the development of stronger bacteria that antibiotics are not as effective against. When you take antibiotics, the weaker bacteria are killed, but the stronger ones may remain and even grow stronger. That means when you really need an antibiotic, you may need a stronger drug that can have more serious side effects.

Taking Antibiotics Properly

If your doctor decides that an antibiotic would be right for you, it is very important to follow the doctor's instructions carefully. The following tips will help, but if there is anything you don't understand, ask your consultant pharmacist.



- Take every dose, exactly when you are supposed to take it, until all of the medicine is gone. As the antibiotic starts to work, you will begin to feel better, but if you stop taking the antibiotic, the stronger bacteria that haven't been killed yet will continue to grow and multiply, and you will begin to feel sick again—maybe even sicker than before.
- Follow any special instructions printed on the bottle. For example, some antibiotics shouldn't be taken along with dairy products.
- Store your antibiotics in a cool, dry place. Check with your consultant pharmacist to see if your medication requires any special storage conditions (such as refrigeration).
- Never take an antibiotic that was prescribed for another illness, even if the symptoms seem to be the same, unless your doctor says it is all right to do so.
- Never take an antibiotic (or any other medicine) that was prescribed for someone else, and never share your medicine with anyone else.

Preventing Illness

It's far better to avoid getting sick than it is to treat an illness after you get it. One of the best protections against the germs that cause illnesses is proper handwashing. You should wash your hands:

- before you eat
- after using the washroom
- after you cough, sneeze, or blow your nose
- after handling objects that were touched by other people

Just rinsing your hands isn't good enough. You need to wash your hands with soap and warm water, and you need to continue washing long enough to get the germs off your hands. (Here's a handy tip that will help: Sing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" to yourself while you wash your hands, and don't stop washing until you finish the song.)

Start by wetting your hands; then apply soap. Rub your hands together, making sure to wash all parts of your hands—your palms, between your fingers (including your thumbs), your fingertips and nails, and the backs of your hands and wrists.

When you are finished washing your hands, dry them thoroughly with a towel. If you are in a public washroom, turn off the taps with a paper towel and then throw it in the trash.

If you have any questions about antibiotics or about how to avoid getting sick, your consultant pharmacist will be happy to answer them.

