

Antibiotics – When You Need Them and When You Don't

Antibiotics are drugs that kill bacteria that cause disease, such as strep throat and some skin infections. Antibiotics do not cure infections caused by viruses, including most cases of sore throat, earache and runny nose. Yet, millions of people each year are prescribed antibiotics for illnesses caused by viruses.

Here's why you should usually avoid antibiotics for these conditions.

In most cases, antibiotics will not help.

- Usually, antibiotics do not work against colds, flu, bronchitis, or sinus infections because these are viruses. Sometimes bacteria cause sinus infections, but even then the infection usually clears up on its own in a week or so. Many common ear infections also clear up on their own without antibiotics. Some sore throats, like strep throat, are bacterial infections. Symptoms include fever, redness and trouble swallowing. However, most people, including children, who have these symptoms do not have strep throat. You should have a strep test to confirm that it's strep, and then, your doctor will prescribe antibiotics if they're needed.

Antibiotics have risks.

- Side effects from antibiotics are a common reason for children to go to the emergency room. The drugs can cause diarrhea or vomiting, and about 5 in 100 children have allergies to them. Some of these allergic reactions can be serious and life threatening.
- Overusing antibiotics also encourages stronger bacteria to grow. These stronger bacteria do not respond to antibiotics.

Antibiotics are a waste of money if used incorrectly.

- Most antibiotics do not cost a lot. But money spent on drugs that are not needed is money wasted.

When You Should Take Antibiotics

You may need antibiotics if:

- Your cough does not get better in 14 days.
- A bacterial form of pneumonia or whooping cough (pertussis) is diagnosed.
- Symptoms of a sinus infection do not get better in 10 days, or you get better and then worse again.

- Your child has a yellow-green nasal discharge and a fever of at least 102° F for several days in a row.
- You or your child has strep throat, based on a rapid strep test or a throat culture. Antibiotics should not be prescribed unless one of the tests shows strep. Strep cannot be diagnosed just by looking at the throat.

Talk With Your Doctor

Most people don't need antibiotics when they are sick because most common illnesses are caused by viruses. If you have symptoms that linger longer than usual or that resolve and come back, you might benefit from an antibiotic. Talk with your doctor about your symptoms so they can decide if you need one.

Learn more about the recommendations at www.ownyourhealthwa.org/partners/choosingwisely or <https://www.wsma.org/choosing-wisely>.

To learn how local doctors are doing with providing the recommended care, visit www.wacommunitycheckup.org, click "compare scores," select "medical groups" or "clinics," click "appropriate use of care" and click either of the two measures about appropriate prescribing of antibiotics.