

Can antibiotics sometimes be harmful?

Antibiotics are generally safe and very helpful in fighting disease, but there are certain cases where antibiotics can actually be harmful. These are some things to watch for while taking antibiotics:

- **Side effects of the antibiotics**

Some common side effects of antibiotics include nausea, diarrhea and stomach pain. Sometimes these symptoms can lead to dehydration and other problems. Be sure that your doctor has told you about side effects. It is very important to notify your doctor if you have any side effects from your antibiotics.

- **Allergic reaction**

Some people may experience an allergic reaction characterized by rash, itching and in severe cases difficulty breathing. Tell your doctor about any drug allergies you have had in the past.

- **Antibiotic resistance**

Antibiotic resistance has become a very big problem in the world today. Resistance may result when antibiotics are used too often or inappropriately for viral infections. When resistance develops, the antibiotic is not able to kill the germs causing the infection. Your infection may last longer, and instead of getting better you get worse. Every time you take an antibiotic when you really don't need it or if you take it incorrectly, you increase your chance of getting an illness someday that is resistant to antibiotics.

Antibiotic issues specific to women

Antibiotics can lead to vaginal yeast infections. This happens because antibiotics kill the normal bacteria in the vagina and this causes yeast to grow rapidly. Symptoms of a yeast infection include one or all of the following symptoms: itching, burning, pain during sex, and vaginal discharge. Antibiotics may cause birth control pills to be less effective. Another method of birth control may be needed during antibiotic treatment. Some antibiotics may be passed on to a fetus and cause harm. Because of this, it is important to let your doctor know if you are pregnant or nursing.

Resources

Medem—The Nation's Medical Society
www.medem.com

American Academy of Family Physicians
www.aafp.org

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
www.cdc.gov

Food & Drug Administration
www.fda.gov

National Institutes of Health
www.nih.gov

Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics
www.healthsci.tufts.edu

Georgia-Pacific Health Smart Institute
www.gphealthsmart.com

Special thanks to Rhonda Harsch, RN, for writing the original manuscript, and to Arlene Potts, BA, MPH, CIC, Kathy Brooks, RN, PhD, CIC, and Lianne Delaney, RN, MPH, CIC for reviewing the brochure.

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Antibiotic Safety

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What are Antibiotics?

Antibiotics are powerful medicines that help stop bacterial infections. They are used to kill germs that cause certain illnesses. Protect yourself and your family by learning how to take them correctly. Learn when you should and should not take antibiotics.

What germs cause most infections?

Viruses and bacteria are the two types of germs that cause infections. It is very important to know that antibiotics cannot kill virus germs but can kill bacteria germs.

Viral infections should not be treated with antibiotics. Some examples of viral illnesses include:

- Common cold—stuffy nose, sore throat, sneezing, cough, headache
- Influenza (flu)—fever, chills, body aches, headache, sore throat, dry cough
- Most coughs
- Acute bronchitis (cough, fever)—almost always caused by viruses
- Pharyngitis (sore throat)—most sore throats are caused by viruses and are not effectively treated with an antibiotic
- Viral gastroenteritis

Bacterial infections should be treated with antibiotics. Some examples of bacterial infections include:

- Ear infections—Antibiotics are used for most, but not all ear infections
- Severe sinus infections—lasting two or more weeks
- Strep throat
- Bladder infection

What should I ask my doctor?

If your doctor prescribes antibiotics, you should ask the following questions:

1. Why do I need the antibiotic?
2. What is the antibiotic suppose to do?
3. What are the side effects of the antibiotic?
4. Is there anything that can prevent the side effects?
5. Should the drug be taken at a special time? With or without food?
6. Does the antibiotic interfere with the effectiveness of other medications such as birth control pills?
7. Are there any possible adverse reactions if the antibiotic is taken with other medications, food, or alcohol?

Also, be sure to tell your doctor about any of the following:

- previous drug reactions
- special diet
- allergies to drugs or foods
- health problems
- chance of pregnancy
- medicines you are currently taking
- herbal supplements you are currently using

Always keep your doctor's phone number nearby in case of an emergency. If you have any questions or problems regarding your antibiotic treatment or your illness, don't hesitate to call your doctor, nurse, or health care provider.



How do I take antibiotics safely and effectively?

Over half of the people who use medications don't use them as prescribed. Here are some tips to avoid misuse and/or overuse of antibiotics:

- Do not demand that your doctor give you antibiotics for a viral infection. Antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses.
- Take all of your prescribed antibiotic, even if you start to feel better. Do not save some of your antibiotic for the next time you get sick.
- Do not take an antibiotic that has been prescribed for someone else. Do not let anyone take your antibiotic, even if the symptoms are the same.
- Keep a written record of each time antibiotics are taken, including the name, strength, how often and how long the antibiotic was taken and any side effects experienced. Share this information with your doctor each time antibiotics are prescribed in order to assist your doctor in determining which antibiotic is best for you.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist what to do if you should forget or miss a dose.

Tips to help you protect yourself from infections:

- Wash your hands properly to reduce the chance of getting sick and spreading infection. Alternatively, use an alcohol based hand rub if soap and water are not available.
- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly; avoid raw eggs and undercooked meat to help prevent foodborne infection.
- When caring for an ill person whose defenses are weakened, antibacterial soaps or products are helpful, but should be used as directed.
- Make sure you are current on all of your vaccinations. Ask your doctor if you have all of the vaccinations you need to protect yourself from illness. Getting vaccinated will help prevent having to take more medications.