

ANTIBIOTICS: USE THEM WISELY AND SAFELY

What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are medications that help our bodies fight bacterial infections. Antibiotics kill *only* bacteria. They have **no** effect on viruses that are the cause of common infections like colds, flu, most sinusitis, and most chest colds (bronchitis).

When should I take antibiotics?

Based on your symptoms and the results of the medical examination, the medical staff will determine whether or not you would benefit from antibiotics. They will recommend a course of antibiotics if you have a bacterial infection.

When should I *not* take antibiotics?

Most adults average 3 to 5 colds a year. Remember, since colds are caused by viruses, antibiotics are ineffective against them. Most colds last for a week, but it's not unusual for symptoms to continue for as long as 2 to 3 weeks. We used to think that colored mucus indicated a bacterial infection. Now we know it is common to have yellow or green mucus with viral infections like colds or flu. In addition, severity of illness does not help distinguish between viral and bacterial causes. Having colored mucus does not mean you need antibiotics. Note that if antibiotics are taken for viral infections, it can seem as if they are helping because viral infections resolve on their own anyway.

Are antibiotics harmful?

Antibiotics are extremely helpful in treating infections caused by bacteria. However, antibiotics can cause side effects, such as upset stomach, diarrhea, vaginal infections, rashes, and rarely, life-threatening allergic reactions (even to ones you have used without problems in the past). In addition, overuse of antibiotics can increase your chances of having bacterial infections later that cannot be treated easily due to bacterial resistance. These resistant bacteria can then be transmitted to others. This is why more and more bacteria are becoming resistant to common antibiotics, now a major public health problem.

Will antibiotics help speed up my recovery?

Antibiotics won't help you feel better or shorten the time you have a cold or the flu. Even if you have taken antibiotics in the past and they seemed "to work," studies have shown that antibiotics do not shorten the duration of illness for viral infections; you would have recovered as quickly on your own, without medication. Give your immune system the credit it deserves. Your uncomfortable cold or flu symptoms are signs that your body's defenses are working against the virus.

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ANTIBIOTICS: USE THEM WISELY AND SAFELY (continued)

If antibiotics are not the answer for common viral infections, what is?

Trust that your body will ultimately heal itself. The following are some self-care measures you can take when you're sick with a virus like a cold or flu:

- Drink plenty of non-caffeinated beverages.
- Get lots of rest (modify your exercise program to avoid excessive fatigue).
- Inhale steam from a hot shower or vaporizer and/or moisten the air with a humidifier.
- Avoid smoking and smoky environments.
- Consider over-the-counter medications (decongestants, gargles, lozenges, cough syrups, acetaminophen). They won't affect the virus itself, but they can relieve symptoms. It's usually best to take a medicine targeted for a particular symptom, rather than an all-in-one preparation. Don't forget to read warning labels and follow the instructions.
- Review the Colds + Flu What To Do pamphlet, available outside all clinics or cold care on UHS website under patient information.

Working Together

The UHS staff is interested in helping you feel better as quickly as possible. We will prescribe antibiotics when needed; however, for your safety and well-being, we will not recommend unnecessary use of antibiotics or other medications. Please feel free to discuss your treatment options with your clinician.

For more information please visit the following web sites:

- <http://familydoctor.org/handouts/680.html>
- <http://www.uptodate.com> (search what you should know about antibiotics)

Check our website: www.uhs.berkeley.edu to learn more about this medical concern or others.

For an appointment www.uhs.berkeley.edu or call **510-642-2000**

Clinic Nurse **510-643-7197** for advice