

When is it appropriate to use antibiotics?

Antibiotics are effective against bacterial infections, certain fungal infections and some kinds of parasites. **Antibiotics don't work against viruses.**

The chart below shows common illnesses and whether they're caused by bacteria or viruses. Taking an antibiotic when you have a viral infection won't make you feel better — and can contribute to antibiotic resistance.

Bacterial infections	Viral infections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bladder infections • Many wound and skin infections, such as staph infections • Severe sinus infections that last longer than 2 weeks • Some ear infections • Strep throat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bronchitis • Colds • Flu (influenza) • Most coughs • Most ear infections • Most sore throats • Stomach flu (viral gastroenteritis)

Consequences of antibiotic misuse

If antibiotics are used too often for things they can't treat — like colds, flu or other viral infections — not only are they of no benefit, they become less effective against the bacteria they're intended to treat.

Not taking antibiotics exactly as prescribed also leads to problems. For example, if you take an antibiotic for only a few days — instead of the full course — the antibiotic may wipe out some, but not all, of the bacteria. The surviving bacteria become more resistant and can be spread to other people. When bacteria become resistant to first line treatments, the risk of complications and death is increased.

What you can do to safeguard antibiotic effectiveness?



Repeated and improper use of antibiotics is the primary cause of the increase in the number of drug-resistant bacteria. Here's what you can do to promote proper use of antibiotics:

Understand when antibiotics should be used. Don't expect to take antibiotics every time you're sick. Antibiotics are effective in treating most bacterial infections, but they're not useful against viral infections, such as colds, acute bronchitis or the flu.



Don't pressure your doctor for antibiotics if you have a viral illness. Instead, talk with your doctor about ways to relieve your symptoms.

Take antibiotics exactly as prescribed. Follow your doctor's instructions when taking medication. Don't stop treatment a few days early because you're feeling better. Taking the full course of antibiotics is the only way to kill all of the harmful bacteria.

Never take antibiotics without a prescription. If you didn't complete a full course of antibiotics, you might be tempted to use the leftover medication the next time you get sick or to pass it along to someone else. But this isn't a good idea. Again, taking the full course of antibiotics is the only way to kill all of the harmful bacteria.

Prevent the spread of germs. Good hygiene goes a long way in preventing infection. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water, especially after using the toilet, changing a diaper, or handling raw meat or poultry. Plain soap and water work fine to kill germs in most settings.



Get recommended vaccinations. Ask your doctor if you have all of the vaccinations you need to protect yourself from illness including a flu vaccine annually.