Allina Health

Antibiotics: What You Need To Know

Bacterial Infection

Antibiotics (medicines) only treat certain infections caused by bacteria such as:

- strep throat
- bacterial pneumonia
- whooping cough (pertussis)
- urinary tract infection.

Antibiotics are also not needed for common bacterial infections such as many sinus infections and some ear infections.

Antibiotics Do Not Work for Viral Infections

A viral infection is caused by a virus that spreads easily and must run its course. Antibiotics do not work for viruses. Examples of viral infections include:

- most sore throats
- most pink eye (conjunctivitis)
- colds and runny noses (even if the mucus is yellow or green)
- most coughs
- influenza
- croup
- viral pneumonia
- RSV (respiratory syncytial virus)
- bronchitis
- rotavirus
- most diarrhea and vomiting
- COVID-19 (coronavirus).

Antibiotic Resistance

Some of the bacteria (germs) that antibiotics treat are getting so strong that they are becoming resistant to antibiotics. This means that the antibiotic will not work to treat the illness. If the germs are not stopped, they can make you sick again.

Using an antibiotic too much or not taking it as directed may make germs resistant to the medicine. This can make you sick longer. These germs can also grow and spread from person to person, which makes some diseases hard to control.

Antibiotics and Medicine Interactions

Antibiotics may interact with prescription and over-the-counter medicines. This means the medicines will not work as well when taken together.

For example:

- antibiotics may reduce how well birth control pills prevent pregnancy
- antacids may reduce how well an antibiotic is absorbed by your body.

Make sure your health care provider or pharmacist knows all of the medicines you are taking. They can tell you if the antibiotic may interact with your medicine(s).

Tips for Taking Antibiotics

- If you have an infection, ask your health care provider if it is bacterial or viral.

- Do not take an antibiotic for a viral infection such as a cold or flu.

- Take the antibiotic the way your health care provider or pharmacist tells you to.
It is important to take all of the medicine for the number of days listed on the medicine label. Do not to skip doses.

- Finish your prescription, even if you are feeling better.

- Always take the antibiotic until it is gone, even if you start to feel better. If you stop taking the antibiotic too soon, some of the bacteria may survive and you may get sick again.

- Do not save part of an antibiotic prescription to use another time you are sick.

- Do not take an antibiotic that is prescribed for someone else. The antibiotic may not be the right treatment for your illness.

- Tell your health care provider if you have concerns or any reactions to the antibiotic.

Information adapted from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

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