

# Antibiotics

Don't wear me out.



**NHS**

*Antibiotics are important medicines. They help you fight infections that are caused by bacteria. So we need to look after them.*

## *Why is this important?*

*Because bacteria are clever: they adapt and find ways to survive the effects of an antibiotic. They become 'antibiotic resistant' so that the antibiotic no longer works. The more we use an antibiotic, the more likely it is that bacteria will become resistant to it.*

## *So what does this mean?*

*Put bluntly, it means that antibiotics are becoming less effective at fighting infections.*

## *Surely there are plenty of other antibiotics that can be used instead?*

*Well, up to now, yes - but they may not be as effective, and they may have more side effects. And eventually the bacteria will become resistant to them too.*

## *Why is antibiotic resistance a problem now?*

*Firstly, it is becoming more common. Some bacteria are now resistant to several antibiotics: they are 'multidrug resistant'. Secondly, we cannot be sure we will always be able to find new antibiotics to replace the old ones. In recent years fewer new antibiotics have been discovered.*

## *So what can we do?*

*We can't stop resistance occurring, but we can do a lot to slow it down and stop it spreading. We must look after the antibiotics we have by using them carefully.*

## *How can we do that?*

*By not taking antibiotics when we don't need them. We now know that many infections get better just as quickly without antibiotics - in fact, antibiotics don't work against viruses. Remember, antibiotics are not always the answer.*

## ***How do I know if it is a viral infection?***

*Viral infections are much more common than bacterial infections. All colds and most coughs and sore throats are caused by viruses.*

## ***But colds always go to my chest. Surely I need an antibiotic then?***

*Usually not. Most colds last about two weeks and end with a cough and coloured sputum. You need to see your doctor, though, if your cough lasts more than three weeks, or you become very short of breath or develop chest pains, or you already have a chest complaint. You should also see your doctor if you are worried about your symptoms.*

## ***How will I get better quickly, if antibiotics are not the answer?***

*There are usually remedies you can take to help ease the symptoms - paracetamol, for example, or a cold remedy from the chemist. Ask your pharmacist for advice.*

## ***My children are always getting infections. What should I do?***

*Children do get frequent coughs and colds. This is normal, especially when they start to mix with other children. Ask your pharmacist for advice. If you are particularly concerned, do still go to your doctor, but don't necessarily expect an antibiotic to be prescribed. Your doctor may suggest an alternative treatment to help relieve their symptoms.*

## ***So when are antibiotics the answer? When might I need an antibiotic?***

*Your doctor will prescribe an antibiotic when you need one, for example, for a kidney infection or pneumonia. Antibiotics may be lifesaving for infections such as meningitis. By not using them unnecessarily, they are more likely to work when we need them.*

## ***If I am prescribed antibiotics, should I stop taking them as soon as I begin to feel better?***

*No. Take them as prescribed and finish the course, unless your doctor or pharmacist advises otherwise. Antibiotic resistance is more likely to develop if antibiotics are taken intermittently, for example, just when you remember, or in too low a dose.*

*Do not expect your doctor to prescribe antibiotics for colds, or for most coughs and sore throats. All colds, and most coughs and sore throats, are caused by viruses, so an antibiotic won't help. There are usually remedies you can take to help relieve the symptoms - ask your pharmacist for advice.*

*Further copies of this leaflet are available free from:  
Department of Health, PO Box 777, London, SE1 6XH*

*Also available on the Department of Health website at:  
[www.doh.gov.uk/antibioticresistance/](http://www.doh.gov.uk/antibioticresistance/)*

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