

Know when antibiotics work



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Questions and answers from the FDA Center for Drug Evaluation and Research

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Cough? Sore Throat? Runny Nose?

You or a loved one feels miserable and you've come to the doctor looking for help.

Q: I'm sick. Don't I need a prescription for an antibiotic?

A: Your doctor has examined you and determined that your illness is caused by a viral infection. Antibiotics do NOT treat viral illnesses like a cold, flu and most sore throats.

Q: If antibiotics don't treat viral illnesses like cold and flu, what do they treat?

A: Antibiotics are used to treat illnesses caused by bacteria. Examples of illnesses caused by bacteria include strep throat, tuberculosis and many types of pneumonia.

Q: Even though my illness may be caused by a virus, what harm can it do to take an antibiotic?

A: Taking antibiotics when they aren't needed contributes to the serious problem of antibiotic resistance.

Q: What is antibiotic resistance?

A: This is when bacteria cannot be killed by antibiotics. The bacteria have become resistant. If this continues, over time some recurring infections may have to be treated with different and stronger antibiotics and the very real possibility that eventually no antibiotic will be effective in killing the bacteria.

Q: If antibiotics will not help me, what will?

A: There are many over-the-counter products available to treat the symptoms of your viral infection. These include cough suppressants which will help control coughing and decongestants to help relieve a stuffy nose. Read the label and ask your pharmacist or doctor if you have any questions about which will work best for you.

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Help Yourself Feel Better While You Are Sick

A cold usually lasts only a couple of days to a week. Tiredness from the flu may continue for several weeks.

To feel better while you are sick:

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Use a humidifier — an electric device that puts water into the air.

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Over-the-Counter Medications

There are a variety of OTC medications out there to also help you feel better. Always read the label — including the warnings — before taking any medication. If you have a pre-existing medical condition, such as high blood pressure, diabetes or heart disease, check with your doctor about which OTC product is best for you.

- Antihistamine: reduces itchy watery eyes, sneezing, scratchy throat
- Decongestant: reduces nasal congestion
- Cough Suppressant: reduces coughing
- Expectorant: breaks up mucus (phlegm) in the chest
- Pain reliever: reduces aches and pain
- Fever Reducer: reduces body temperature

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Contact Your Doctor Again If:

- Your symptoms get worse
- Your symptoms last a long time
- After feeling a little better, you develop signs of a more serious problem. Some of these signs are a sick-to-your-stomach feeling, vomiting, high fever, shaking chills, chest pain.

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This message provides general health or safety information and is not a substitute for diagnosis or treatment by a physician or other health care professional.