



Antibiotics — When They Help and When They Don't

Patient leaflet. Why you may not need one, how to take one if you do, and what to do with the rest

Antibiotics kill bacteria. They do nothing to viruses.

Colds, flu, most sore throats, most coughs and bronchitis, most ear infections in children and most sinus infections are caused by viruses. An antibiotic will not make you better faster — but it can give you side effects, and every course makes the bacteria you carry a little more resistant, for you and for the people around you.

Usually NO antibiotic	Often YES — your doctor decides
Common cold, flu, COVID-19 Sore throat (unless a test shows strep) Cough and bronchitis Most ear infections in children Sinusitis under 10 days Stomach upset and diarrhoea	Pneumonia Urinary infection with symptoms Skin infection that is spreading Strep throat confirmed by a test Some ear infections in young children Infections after surgery

If you are prescribed one

- Take it exactly as written — the dose, the times, the number of days. Do not stop early because you feel better, and do not take extra.
- Tell your doctor or pharmacist about allergies and the other medicines you take.
- If you get a rash, swelling, breathing difficulty or severe diarrhoea, stop and get help.

Never

- Take antibiotics left over from a previous illness, or someone else's.
- Buy them without a prescription.
- Ask for one "just in case". Ask instead: "Do I need this, and what happens if I wait?"

Your questions are welcome. "Is this bacterial or viral?" · "What will happen if I don't take an antibiotic?" · "Which one, and why this one?" · "How many days?" — A doctor who explains is following good practice, not doubting you.

ASF standards: Standard 2 — patient information; Standard 4 — antimicrobial stewardship