

Infection Prevention and You



Antibiotics: Preserving them for the future

What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are life-saving drugs first used during World War II to treat bacterial infections. Before the discovery of these miracle drugs, many people became very ill or died as a result of bacterial infections that antibiotics now easily treat.

What is antibiotic resistance?

Antibiotic resistance happens when bacteria change in a way that reduces or eliminates the effectiveness of antibiotics. As a result, stronger, more expensive antibiotics are needed to overcome the same bacteria. People who develop antibiotic-resistant infections are more likely to need hospitalization and are at increased risk for death. Using antibiotics inappropriately contributes to the rise in antibiotic-resistant infections.

How do I know if I'm using antibiotics appropriately?

Some people who suffer with symptoms during cough and cold season often seek an antibiotic prescription from their healthcare provider. It is important to know that antibiotics will not help reduce symptoms caused by the common cold or flu. Antibiotics are often unnecessary for ear infections, sore throat, and sinus infections as well.

Should I avoid taking antibiotics prescribed by my healthcare provider?

No. Antibiotics are useful and effective when taken as prescribed by your healthcare provider for a bacterial infection. In fact, be certain to take your antibiotic prescription as prescribed if a healthcare provider determines that your illness is bacterial and requires treatment. Do not skip doses. Also, it is important to take the entire course to ensure that no pesky bacteria linger because this can lead to subsequent antibiotic-resistant infections.

How can I help prevent antibiotic-resistance?

- Take antibiotics exactly as your doctor prescribes.
- Only take antibiotics prescribed for you – do not share or use leftover antibiotics.
- Do not save antibiotics for the next illness.
- Discard leftover medication once the prescribed treatment course is completed.
- Do not ask your doctor for antibiotics when your doctor thinks you do not need them.

In the event that you do get a viral illness, like a cold, that an antibiotic won't treat, you can do the following:

- Get plenty of rest.
- Stay hydrated by drinking water and other fluids.
- Treat symptoms with home remedies (e.g., hot tea to soothe a sore throat).
- Consider over-the-counter treatments (e.g., saline nasal spray).

Additional resources

CDC – Get Smart Know When Antibiotics Work <http://www.cdc.gov/getsmart/>

CDC – Vital Signs, Antibiotic RX in Hospitals <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/antibiotic-prescribing-practices/index.html>

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