

What You Need to Know When You Are Prescribed an Antibiotic

Your healthcare team has prescribed antibiotics for you because they think you may have an infection or another condition which requires antibiotics.

Antibiotics are powerful medications that kill bacteria and can save lives. Some infections can be treated with antibiotics. Like all medications, antibiotics have side effects and should only be used when necessary. Your doctor thinks the benefits of antibiotics are greater than the possible risks at this time.

What are some questions to ask my doctor about antibiotics?

As a patient or caregiver, it is important to understand your or your loved one's antibiotic treatment. Here are some important questions to ask your healthcare team if they haven't already talked about this with you:

- What infection or condition is this antibiotic treating, and how do you know I have that infection or condition?
- What side effects might occur from this antibiotic?
- How long will I need to take this antibiotic?
- Is it safe to take this antibiotic with other medications or supplements (like vitamins) that I am taking?
- Are there any special directions I need to know about taking this antibiotic? For example, should I take it with food?
- How will I be monitored to know whether my infection or condition is responding to the antibiotic?

Will I have side effects from my antibiotic?

You might. One of the most common side effects of nearly all antibiotics is diarrhea. Usually this is not severe, but occasionally diarrhea can be caused by a bacteria called *Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile*, or "*C. diff*"). This happens

because antibiotics destroy some of the normal, helpful bacteria in your gut. This may allow the *C. difficile* bacteria to take over, and it puts patients at high risk for this serious infection.

Another common side effect of antibiotics is an allergic reaction. A rash is most common, but some reactions can be more serious. Not all rashes are allergies, though, so it is important to talk with your doctor if you get a rash. The most serious allergic reactions include hives (itchy red patches with swelling), lip, tongue, or throat swelling, wheezing or difficulty breathing, or vomiting.

When should I call my doctor?

Most diarrhea caused by antibiotics is not infectious and should not cause concern. You should **let your healthcare team know right away if you develop watery stool (poop) 3 times or more per day** while taking an antibiotic, because that may be a sign of a *C. difficile* infection. Diarrhea caused by *C. difficile* can be serious and it must be treated quickly. The risk of getting *C. difficile* diarrhea is highest during the first month, but it can last for up to 3 months after you stop taking antibiotics. Let your healthcare team know if you develop diarrhea even after you stop taking an antibiotic.

Call your doctor if you develop a rash or another sign of an allergic reaction while taking an antibiotic.

Call 911 to get help immediately if:

- You develop lip, tongue, or throat swelling
- You are wheezing or have difficulty breathing

Remember, antibiotics are life-saving drugs and they need to be used properly. It is important to take your antibiotics exactly as prescribed. If you have any questions about your antibiotics, please talk with your healthcare team.

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Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). You've Been Prescribed an Antibiotic in the Hospital for an Infection. Access at: [https://www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-](https://www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use/community/pdfs/Inpatient-Fact-Sheet-P.pdf)

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Author: Vanessa Scowden, MD

Edited by: Brittany Batell, MPH MSW

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