

# Antibiotics Are Not Always the Answer

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## Get Smart-Know When Antibiotics Work

When you feel sick, you want to feel better fast. But antibiotics aren't the answer for every illness. This material can help you know when antibiotics work - and when they won't. For more information, talk to your health care provider or visit <http://www.cdc.gov/getsmart>

## What's the harm in taking antibiotics anytime?

Using antibiotics causes some bacteria in your body to become resistant to the antibiotic. These resistant bacteria are stronger and harder to kill. They can stay in your body and can cause severe illnesses that may not be cured with antibiotics.

Taking antibiotics also kills helpful bacteria that live in your intestines. This can lead to diarrhea, and in particular, a severe form of diarrhea caused by a bacteria called *C. difficile*. Antibiotics may also cause allergic reactions or other unwanted side effects.

When you need an antibiotic to treat a bacterial infection, these risks are small enough that it's worth taking the risk. But if an antibiotic won't help you because you do not have a bacterial infection, it's not worth the risk.

To avoid the threat of antibiotic-resistant infections and other antibiotic side effects, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that you avoid taking unnecessary antibiotics.

## Antibiotics Aren't Always the Answer

Most illnesses are caused by two kinds of germs: bacteria or viruses. Antibiotics can cure bacterial infections – not viral infections.

Bacteria cause strep throat, some pneumonia and some sinus infections. Antibiotics can work to cure these illnesses. Viruses cause the common cold, most coughs and the flu. **Antibiotics will not work to cure these illnesses.**

Using antibiotics for a virus:

- Will **not** cure the infection
- Will **not** help you feel better
- Will **not** keep others from catching your illness

## Viruses or Bacteria: What's got you sick?

Check the table below to see which common illnesses need to be treated with an antibiotic and which do not. If your illness cannot be treated with an antibiotic, ask your health care provider for tips on how to relieve symptoms and feel better.

Illness	Usual Cause		Antibiotic Needed
	Virus	Bacteria	
Cold/Runny Nose	Yes	No	No
Bronchitis/Chest Cold (in otherwise healthy children and adults)	Yes	No	No
Whooping Cough	No	Yes	Yes
Flu	Yes	No	No
Strep Throat	No	Yes	Yes
Sore Throat (except strep)	Yes	No	No
Fluid in the Middle Ear (otitis media with effusion)	Yes	No	No
Urinary Tract Infection	No	Yes	Yes

[www.cdc.gov/getsmart](http://www.cdc.gov/getsmart). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.  
Sept 2014

## **Commonly Asked Questions:**

### **How do I know if I have a viral or bacterial infection?**

Most colds and bronchitis are caused by viruses. If you're unsure, ask your health care provider and follow his or her advice on what to do about your illness. Do not use antibiotics unless your provider prescribes them.

### **Won't an antibiotic help me feel better quicker so that I can get back to work when I get a cold or the flu?**

No, antibiotics do nothing to help a viral illness. They will not help you feel better sooner. Your health care provider can give advice about other treatments available to treat your symptoms.

### **If mucus from the nose changes from clear to yellow or green — does this mean I need an antibiotic?**

No, yellow or green mucus does not mean that you have a bacterial infection. It is normal for mucus to get thick and change color during a viral cold.

## **Get smart...**

- Antibiotics are strong medicines, but they don't cure everything.
- When not used correctly, antibiotics can actually be harmful to your health.
- Antibiotics can cure most bacterial infections. Antibiotics cannot cure viral illnesses.
- When you are sick, antibiotics are not always the answer.

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Adapted from: CDC. *Chart: Viruses or Bacteria — What's Got You Sick? and Cold or Flu. Antibiotics Don't Work for You.* Access at: <https://www.cdc.gov/getsmart/community/index.html>

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