



## How to take your antibiotics

### What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are medicines used to treat infections caused by bacteria. Antibiotics work by killing bacteria. If you are having an operation for example a hip replacement or bowel surgery, you will be prescribed antibiotics at the time of surgery to prevent an infection. Antibiotics *do not work against infections caused by viruses* such as common colds, flu, most coughs or sore throats.

### How do I take my antibiotics?

Antibiotics are usually tablets to be swallowed. However, sometimes they are given as drops, lotion or ointment to the skin, eye or ear. Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist will tell you how and when to take your antibiotics. If you are not sure, ask. Please use the antibiotics in the way they have been prescribed, and take them at the times that your doctor or pharmacist tells you. Antibiotics can also be given by injection into a vein. This is usually in people with severe infections or in people about to have surgery. If you have antibiotics that you have not used for any reason, ask your pharmacist to dispose of them.

**Never** give your antibiotics to friends, family or pets and do not keep leftover antibiotics.

### Is there anything I need to do if I've been prescribed an antibiotic?

You need to talk to your doctor or pharmacist about any other medicines you might be taking, or any other health conditions you have.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Are you taking other medication?**

It is important to tell your doctor or pharmacist if you are taking any other medicines or herbal remedies before you start antibiotics. Antibiotics can interfere with other medicines – for example, blood thinners such as warfarin, also medicines used to treat



high cholesterol such as 'statins' Also some medicines can interfere with some antibiotics for example calcium supplements.

- **Could you be pregnant or are you breastfeeding?**

Some antibiotics are unsuitable if you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

- **Do you have liver or kidney problems?**

Some antibiotics do not work, or you may need a different dose if you have kidney or liver problems.

- **Have you any allergies?**

Some antibiotics are not used if you could be allergic to them.

- **Have you had a gut infection called C diff (*Clostridium difficile*) in the past?**

Antibiotics can make the C diff infection come back again.

**If you have questions or doubts, always ask your doctor or pharmacist.**

### **Do antibiotics have harmful side effects?**

The most common side effects of antibiotics are diarrhoea, stomach pain, a sick tummy and vomiting. Some antibiotics may make your skin more sensitive to the sun. If the antibiotic makes you feel unwell, talk to your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

Some people who take antibiotics can get thrush (candida) of the mouth or vagina. Thrush is a fungal infection, sometimes called a yeast infection. This happens because antibiotics can kill your body's 'good' bacteria. Good bacteria help to stop the fungus growing. Speak with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse if your mouth or vagina gets sore or gets a white coating when you are on antibiotics.

Antibiotics could cause overgrowth of a bacteria known as C diff (*Clostridium difficile*) in your bowel. This can cause severe watery diarrhoea with stomach pain and cramping. This can happen while you are taking antibiotics and even up to some months after you finish the antibiotics. If you develop diarrhoea that is severe or that lasts for more than a day or two when you are taking antibiotics, contact your doctor.



If you are allergic to antibiotics, for example penicillin, you may get a rash and itching or, in severe cases, you might have difficulty breathing. If you have sudden difficulty with your breathing after taking an antibiotic, you should talk to a doctor or nurse immediately. If you are not in hospital when this happens, you should ring for an ambulance immediately.

### **What is antibiotic resistance and can I help to prevent it?**

Antibiotic resistance is when bacteria change in some way and are not killed off by the antibiotic. Bacteria can change very quickly, and if they become antibiotic resistant, an antibiotic that used to kill them no longer works. These bacteria are often called 'superbugs'. Examples of superbugs include MRSA and CPE.

To help prevent antibiotic resistance, only take antibiotics when you need them. If you take antibiotics when you don't need them, they may not work so well when you do need them.

Many bacteria are already much harder to kill with antibiotics than they were a few years ago. If the bacteria keep 'overpowering' the antibiotics we have, we may run out of ways to kill these bacteria.

Antibiotic resistance is bad for anyone who has taken an antibiotic, but it is also bad for anyone else who might catch the resistant bacteria afterwards.

**Only take antibiotics if they have been prescribed by your doctor, and make sure you take them exactly as you've been told to.**

**This information is approved for use by the HSE's Antimicrobial Resistance and Infection Control national programme. Text awarded Plain English mark from the National Adult Literacy Agency**

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