

Do You Really Need Antibiotics?

Lots of people think that if they have a cold or fever, antibiotics will cure the infection. Not necessarily! Antibiotics are very powerful medicines that do cure some illnesses, but not all. It all depends on what's making you sick in the first place. Seeing your provider or talking with our trained nursing staff will help to clarify things.

Bacteria or viruses cause most of the respiratory illnesses we acquire. Diseases caused by either can be life-threatening or very mild. Generally, illnesses caused by bacteria can be treated with antibiotics. However, illnesses caused by viruses (like the common cold) just have to "run their course" and die out on their own.

Antibiotics will have no effect on a viral infection, but rest assured, your own healthy body has all the resources it needs to make you well again.

You can do a lot to help your body fight a virus, but it's going to take time to feel well again. Drinking lots of water-based liquids will help to keep you well hydrated and to flush the virus out of your body. Lots of rest, and if you choose to, taking medications that can help treat the symptoms of your illness will also cut short the time you have to suffer through a common viral illness. While it's easy to get frustrated and hope for a quick fix, there really isn't a "wonder drug" that will make you well immediately. For the most part, a cold will make you feel bad for 5-10 days, and even longer if you're pregnant.

It's a good idea to call our office if you have a respiratory illness accompanied by a temperature of 101 or more, discolored (green, brown, dark yellow) nasal discharge or sputum, difficulty breathing or pain in your chest, or symptoms that are getting worse over time. You should also let us know if you have an underlying respiratory disease, such as asthma or emphysema. If your provider thinks your illness will respond to antibiotics, there are a few important things to be aware of. Try not to miss any doses. For the antibiotic to do its job, you need to take every pill, and try to follow the prescribed schedule—for example, "1 tablet every 8 hours." **If you stop taking antibiotics as soon as you start to feel better, you are likely to develop resistant bacteria.** Antibiotic resistant bacteria are difficult if not impossible to cure with antibiotics, and can result in severe illnesses that may require hospitalization.

So it does make sense to see your provider for a respiratory illness and NOT get a prescription for antibiotics. The CDC estimates that ~50 million unnecessary courses of antibiotics are provided by office-based MDs each year. By not using antibiotics for viral illnesses we can still help you to get well, AND help prevent antibiotics from becoming ineffective against resistant bacteria.