

Antibiotics and Common Illnesses

When you're sick, antibiotics can't always help.

In fact, if you take antibiotics when you don't need them they can be harmful.

What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are strong medicines that kill bacteria. They don't kill viruses that cause colds and flu. Your health care provider can decide if you have an illness that can be safely treated with antibiotics.

What's the difference between viruses and bacteria?

Viruses and bacteria are germs that cause infection and illness. Illnesses caused by viruses are more common than illnesses caused by bacteria.

Common illnesses caused by viruses are:

- Colds and flu
- Most sore throats
- Most coughs

Antibiotics can't kill viruses. You'll get better when the virus has run its course.

Common illnesses caused by bacteria are:

- Urinary tract infections
- Strep throat
- Some pneumonia

Antibiotics will help kill the bacteria that cause infections.

What is the harm in using antibiotics?

Bacteria can become resistant to antibiotics. This means that antibiotics won't work to kill the bacteria causing your illness, making it hard to treat the infection. There are 3 main things that can make bacteria resistant to antibiotics:

- Not taking antibiotics as directed (for example, not finishing the entire prescription.)
- Taking antibiotics when you don't need them.
- Using antibiotics too often.

These can cause problems for children as well as adults.

How do I know if I need antibiotics?

The answer depends on the cause of your illness. Your health care provider can answer that question for you. Here are a few examples:

Ear Pain. Both viruses and bacteria can cause ear pain. If you have, or your child has, severe ear pain or ear pain that lasts for more than 48 to 72 hours, you might need to see your health care provider to see if antibiotics will help.

Sinus Infection. Antibiotics can help for long-lasting or severe cases. Most people with thick or green mucus do not have sinus infections, and antibiotics won't help. Your health care provider can decide if you need antibiotics.

Cough or Bronchitis. Most coughs and bronchitis are caused by viruses. Antibiotics won't help.

Sore Throat. Most sore throats are caused by viruses and antibiotics won't help. However, strep throat is caused by bacteria and can be treated with antibiotics. If you have a sore throat, your health care provider will take a throat swab to test for strep before giving you a prescription for an antibiotic.

Colds and Flu. Viruses cause colds and flu. Antibiotics won't help you get better. If you have mucus that changes from clear to yellow or green, it doesn't mean you have a bacterial infection. It's normal for mucus to get thick and change color during a cold or flu. Colds and flu can last for 2 weeks or more.

What can I do?

If your health care provider prescribes antibiotics for you:

- Take them exactly as directed and finish all the pills, even if you start feeling better. This way the antibiotics have a chance to kill all the bacteria.
- Don't save pills for later. Don't share them with other people.
- Do what you can to stop the spread of germs. Remember to wash your hands, especially after you:
 - Use the toilet.
 - Change diapers.
 - Blow your nose, cough, sneeze.
 - Handle uncooked foods.
 - Eat or prepare food.

Important: Avoid drug interaction

If you are taking any other medicines, prescription or over-the-counter, talk to your health care provider or pharmacist to make sure that the combination of drugs is not a problem.

Resources: Where can I get more information?

The **Kaiser Permanente Resource Line** can give you information on a wide range of health topics as well as tips on home treatment for various illnesses. Call weekdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. toll-free 1-800-992-2279.

The **Consulting Nurse Service** is available to Kaiser Permanente members with medical questions or concerns. Call 24 hours a day, toll-free 1-800-297-6877.

Visit the Health and Wellness Resources section on the **Kaiser Permanente website** at kp.org/wa for more information on various health topics.