WHY HAVEN'T I BEEN GIVEN ANTIBIOTICS?

Antibiotics help fight bacterial infections, but using them when they're not needed, or not using them properly, is leading to the germs becoming resistant to them. This means they don't work as well when they *are* really needed.

The decision to not give antibiotics today has been carefully considered to be the safest option to help manage your illness.

This leaflet explains:

• Which types of **infection** can be treated by antibiotics and which can't.

• Why healthcare professionals **don't prescribe antibiotics** for infections that are probably viral.

• What **antibiotic resistance** is, and what we need to do about it.

WHAT ARE ANTIBIOTICS?

Antibiotics are medications that kill germs called **bacteria**. Most bacteria are not harmful to people. In fact, we need many of them to stay healthy. For example, some bacteria live in our intestines (guts) and help us to digest food.

But some bacteria can cause illnesses and even death. If you have a serious infection that's caused by bacteria, antibiotics can be useful, and even **life-saving.**

Antibiotics can be taken as pills or as liquid medication. They can also be given as creams, drops, or an intravenous (IV) shot or drip.

WHY WOULDN'T I BE GIVEN ANTIBIOTICS?

Antibiotics only work for infections caused by **bacteria**. Most of the common infections that make us sick are **caused by viruses,** not by bacteria. These include:

- All **colds** and **flu**
- Most **coughs** and **sore throats**
- **Sinus** infections
- **Ear** infections, which are common in children.
- Most **chest** infections and bad 'chesty' coughs (bronchitis) that can last for weeks (often called respiratory tract infections)
- Many **stomach** bugs

But with many infections it's not clear what the cause is. The doctor might not be able to tell the cause of an infection without further tests (such as testing samples of urine or phlegm). But it can take days for your doctor to get the results.

For many years doctors may have prescribed antibiotics for common illnesses such as coughs, ear infections, sinusitis and sore throats **"just in case".**

But this is changing...

Having an infection can make you feel **awful.** Most infections, however, will clear up by taking care of yourself **without antibiotics**. Taking antibiotics, even 'just in case', has been shown not to help much at all.

For example, sinusitis or a chest infection usually lasts for **2-3 weeks**. Taking antibiotics only reduces symptoms by around **12-24 hours**, and only around **1 in 18 people** would feel **any effect at all**.

If taken when **not truly needed**, antibiotics can cause unnecessary harm. **1 in 6** people experience unpleasant side-effects from antibiotics, such as diarrhoea, nausea or vomiting.

But a more **serious** reason why your doctor, nurse or pharmacist might not want to give you antibiotics for a common illness is to do with **antibiotic resistance...**

WHAT IS ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE?

Bacteria have learnt to adapt, survive and 'resist' the effects of antibiotics, making them **much harder to kill**. These 'superbugs' multiply and **spread to other people** through close contact, the food we eat, and the environment. People can therefore 'carry' resistant bacteria even if they've never been ill or taken antibiotics. Some bacteria have now become resistant to **all** antibiotics and cannot be killed **at all**.

Antibiotic resistance is made worse by:

1. **Overuse:** When antibiotics are used a lot, repeatedly, or for too long, bacteria have more time to adapt and become resistant to treatment. So it's important that we **only use antibiotics as little as possible and as much as necessary**.
2. **Misuse**: When you take someone else's antibiotics, or don't follow the instructions on your own prescription properly, antibiotics **may not work** as they are supposed to. The germs become resistant to those antibiotics and can't be killed by them.

Antibiotic resistance is a major cause of disability and death and is **getting worse**. There are no 'new' antibiotics, so we need to use the ones we *do* have **appropriately** and **sparingly** to help them work when we all really need them.

If we don't...

- Many **serious infections** will become hard or impossible, to treat.
- Routine **operations** like hip replacements, heart bypasses and caesarean sections will become **less safe**.
- Treatments for conditions like **cancer** will become **more risky**.
- Minor wounds will become very **dangerous** and even life-threatening.

If we stop overusing and misusing antibiotics, resistance can slow down, and antibiotics may start to work again.

Because we all know more about antibiotic resistance now, you might not be given antibiotics even if you had them in the past for the same type of illness.

WHAT CAN I DO?

- **Listen to your healthcare professional** when they say that you probably don't need antibiotics, even if you had them before. You can ask them to explain more.
- Take their advice about **self-care** and **other treatments** available for your symptoms.
- **Never** use leftover antibiotics from previous prescriptions, or those prescribed for another person (or animal), as these may cause you harm.
- **Don't share or give** your antimicrobials to anyone else
- **Don't buy antibiotics** or take antibiotics given to you without a prescription and advice from a healthcare professional.

Speak to your doctor, practice nurse or pharmacist for more information.