

Antibiotics – Patient Information

What are antibiotics and how do they work?

Antibiotics are a group of medicines that are used to treat infections caused by bacteria. They work by either killing bacteria or preventing their growth.

Different types of antibiotics are used to treat different kinds of infection, such as wound infections, blood infections and pneumonia. They can also be used to prevent infections, such as before having certain types of operations.

Antibiotics have **NO** effect on viruses such as the common cold. Antibiotics are available as tablets, capsules, liquids, as well as in creams, drops and even through an intravenous drip.

How do I take my antibiotics?

Some antibiotics need to be taken with food, and others should be taken on an empty stomach. Most antibiotics should be taken at regular intervals (e.g. the same time(s) each day). Always take antibiotics as directed on the packet, the accompanying patient information leaflet that comes with the medicine or as instructed by your Doctor, Nurse or Pharmacist.

Do not use or take prescription-only antibiotics if they have been obtained from anywhere other than a pharmacist or other healthcare professional (for example, prescription-only antibiotics bought online without a prescription). Do not take or give prescribed antibiotics to others.

What to do if you miss a dose

If you forget to take a dose of antibiotic, take it as soon as you remember and continue to take the course as prescribed unless it is nearly time for the next dose in which case skip the missed dose and continue with the doses as before.

Accidentally taking an extra dose

Accidentally taking an extra dose of your antibiotics is unlikely to do you any harm but it can increase the risk of side effects (see overleaf under '**Side effects**'). If you accidentally take extra doses of your antibiotic and are worried or experiencing severe side effects, talk to your care provider/pharmacist or call NHS 111.

Do I have to finish the course, can I save any spare antibiotic for next time?

It is important to complete the entire course of an antibiotic even if you feel better, unless advised not to by a healthcare professional. Stopping an antibiotic part way through a course may lead to the infection returning or the bacteria becoming resistant (see overleaf under '**Antibiotic resistance**').

What do I do with any unwanted antibiotics?

Ensure any extra or unused antibiotic is returned to your local pharmacy for disposal. Don't dispose of them in household waste or down the sink/loo, as this can contaminate soil, plants and water supplies, harming wildlife and leading to antibiotic resistance (see below). Do not be tempted to share them with anyone (humans or animals). Don't save them for *next time* as this may not treat the infection and may be harmful. If a further infection occurs, go and see your local health provider/pharmacist for assessment.

Side effects

All medications come with the risk of side-effects. Antibiotics can kill off normal, helpful bacteria which live in the bowel and vagina. This can allow thrush or bad bacteria (such as *Clostridium difficile*) to grow and multiply.

The most common antibiotic side effects are feeling sick, bloated and having diarrhoea or loose motions. If you have ever had *clostridium difficile* diarrhoea ("C diff") in the past, let your doctor, nurse or pharmacist know before they prescribe you any antibiotics.

On rare occasions, people may have more serious side-effects such as severe diarrhoea, shortness of breath, rash, facial swelling or vomiting. If this occurs seek medical attention, and if severe, call for an ambulance (999). Tell your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you have had a reaction like this in the past.

Can I take antibiotics with my other medicines?

Some antibiotics are not suitable for people with certain medical conditions or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. You should only ever take antibiotics that are prescribed for you. Never borrow them from a friend or family member or take any antibiotics left over from previous treatments.

Some antibiotics can also react with other medications such as the oral contraceptive pill or alcohol. Discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist and read the information leaflet that you are given with the medication.

Antibiotic resistance

Bacteria evolve over time to try and survive the effects of antibiotics, making infections more difficult (or impossible) to treat. The more we use antibiotics, the more the bacteria become resistant to treatment, and the less effective antibiotics become. Resistant bacteria then multiply and spread from person to person, and through the environment.

Antibiotic resistance is one of the main global threats to health, as sadly we are seeing more and more people die each year from resistant infections.

If we do not act now, we will not be able to rely on antibiotics when we really need them. For example, without antibiotics, many surgical operations and cancer treatments could become life-threatening, and some people may not survive more serious infections such as pneumonia or meningitis.

To help slow down resistance, there is a worldwide push to reduce unnecessary antibiotic use for viral infections such as colds, flu and most coughs, ear infections, sinusitis, and diarrhoea.

You can help keep antibiotics working – take the advice in this leaflet and discuss with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist to find out more. Let them know if you have any questions about your antibiotics. You can also visit <https://patient.info/infections/antibiotics-leaflet> for more information.