

# Antibiotics are wasted on colds and flu



If you are suffering from a cold or the flu,  
antibiotics won't help you get better.

**When you have a cold or flu,  
antibiotics just won't do.**



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

visit [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie) or talk to your GP or pharmacist

# What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are medicines used to treat infections that are caused by bacteria (germs). Antibiotics cannot treat infections caused by viruses (such as colds and the flu). Taking antibiotics when you don't need them, like for a cold or flu, is a waste.

Taking antibiotics when they aren't needed might mean that they won't work when you really need them for a serious infection. If you take many courses of antibiotics, bacteria can change so that the antibiotic does not work against them any more. These bacteria are said to be "resistant" to this antibiotic and are much harder to treat.

## Why should I worry about antibiotic resistance?

If you get an infection that can't be treated by antibiotics, your infection can last longer. Instead of getting better, your infection might get worse. You might have to take different medicines or need to be treated in hospital.

## When are antibiotics not needed?

Most common infections are caused by viruses. This includes all colds, most coughs, sore throats, ear infections and diarrhoea. Antibiotics do not work against these infections. Most of these illnesses get better themselves without antibiotics.

As well as putting yourself, or your child, at risk of an infection that can't be treated, taking antibiotics when they are not needed puts you at risk of side effects. About one in five people who take antibiotics develop side effects, such as a rash, upset stomach or diarrhoea.

Don't ask your doctor to give you or your child antibiotics for an infection caused by a virus. Instead, ask your doctor or your pharmacist what you can do to feel better. Your local pharmacist can advise on over-the-counter medications to relieve the symptoms.

## When is it ok for me or my child to take antibiotics?

Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics for infections that are caused by bacteria, such as some chest infections, kidney infection and some ear infections. Antibiotics are life-saving for infections such as meningitis.

If you or your child needs antibiotics, make sure you take them exactly as prescribed. Your pharmacist will explain how to take the antibiotics, some need to be taken on an empty stomach and some have to be taken with food. Make sure you finish the full course, to get rid of the bacteria completely. If the course isn't completed, some bacteria may be left in your body and become resistant to antibiotics.

Even if you feel better before the antibiotic course is completed you must finish them. Do not 'save' left over antibiotics for the next time you, your child, or any other family member is sick. Antibiotics should only be taken on the advice of a doctor; medication that is prescribed for you may not be the right medicine for another person.

## Why didn't my doctor prescribe an antibiotic?

It's because your doctor feels that your infection will clear up on its own through your immune system or it is a viral infection that antibiotics cannot work against. Antibiotics can cause unpleasant side effects such as nausea, sickness or skin rashes.

You should ask your doctor:

- When should I start to feel better and what should I do if I don't start to feel better by then?
- Is there anything I can do to help myself get better?
- When and how should I seek further help?

## The length of time you can expect most common illnesses to last is:

- **Ear infection: around 4 days**
- **Sore throat: around 1 week**
- **Common cold (runny nose): around 1½ weeks**
- **Sinus infection: around 2½ weeks**
- **Cough (which often happens after a common cold): around 3 weeks**

If your infection lasts longer than this, or if you have a pre-existing or long term illness, you should ask your doctor for advice.

## How should I treat my cold, cough or sore throat?

The best way to treat most colds, coughs or sore throats is to drink plenty of fluids and get some rest.

You can take paracetamol or ibuprofen to relieve headache, aches and pains and fever. Ask your pharmacist for advice about over-the-counter remedies. If you are taking medicines for other conditions you must check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking other over-the-counter remedies.

## Key things to remember

- Most common infections don't need antibiotics – they get better by themselves
- Taking antibiotics when you don't need them puts your health, and your family's health, at risk
- If your doctor decides that you need an antibiotic, make sure you take it exactly as prescribed
- Your pharmacist can advise you on over-the-counter remedies that can help to treat many common infections

Where can I get more information about antibiotics and antibiotic resistance?

[www.hse.ie/go/antibiotics](http://www.hse.ie/go/antibiotics)