

Do you really need an antibiotic?

Chances are you don't. Medicine helps us feel better when we're sick. There's no doubt about that. But when it comes to antibiotics, less can be more.

Antibiotics don't treat viruses. And viruses cause most of the illnesses in our communities during cold and flu season. Rather, antibiotics work by destroying illness-causing bacteria. So taking an antibiotic when you actually have a virus can help make those bacteria more and more resistant to treatment.

Still, some doctors write prescriptions for antibiotics, often because patients ask for them or because they want to be extra cautious.

Take the common cold, for example. Every year, adults have an average of two to three colds, and children have even more. Colds are caused by viruses. But in spite of numerous studies that show antibiotics don't fight colds, patients still think they need them and doctors are often willing to prescribe them.

Signs and symptoms

So how can you tell whether you have an infection that requires an antibiotic or simply a cold? It can be confusing to know what to do.

Colds can make you feel achy and run down. At first, your nose may make clear mucus to help wash germs from your sinuses. After a couple of days, your mucus may change color to white, yellow, green, or even bloody. Contrary to common myth, this is normal and does **NOT** mean you need an antibiotic.

Other symptoms of the common cold can last up to 14 days and include:

- Sneezing
- Stuffy nose
- Facial pain and pressure
- Sore throat
- Coughing
- Post-nasal drip (mucus dripping down your throat)
- Watery eyes
- Headache
- Body aches

Even if you were prescribed an antibiotic in the past for these symptoms, it doesn't mean they were needed. You should think twice about asking for them or expecting your doctor to write a prescription. But there are things you can do to treat colds and upper respiratory infections:

- Stay well hydrated by drinking lots of water.
- Take acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Advil) for aches and soreness.
- Use over-the-counter cold and virus medicines to relieve symptoms of sore throat, cough and congestion.
- Use over-the-counter medicines to help thin mucus, such as guaifenesin (Mucinex, Robitussin).
- Get some rest!

On the other hand, if you notice any of these symptoms, it may be time to see a healthcare professional:

- Temperature that stays higher than 100.4°F
- Symptoms that last more than 10 days
- Symptoms that are severe or unusual, including chest pains or trouble breathing

As always, prevention is best. Remember to wash your hands often or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Cover your coughs and sneezes. And help keep your immune system strong by eating healthy and getting plenty of rest and exercise.

Do you have antibiotics left over from an earlier prescription? If so, you might be tempted to take them without medical advice. That can lead to future antibiotic resistance for you and others. That means the antibiotic may not work for you in the future when you really need it.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Journal of the American Medical Association