

# Be Smart About Antibiotics

PREVENT  
**HAIs**  
Healthcare-  
Associated  
Infections

Taking antibiotics when you don't need them is like leaving the lights on all the time.

- The lights may burn out, leaving you in the dark when you most need them.
- If you use antibiotics when you don't need them, they may not work when you get sick.

Antibiotics can help the body fight infections caused by germs called bacteria, but they are not miracle drugs for everything.

## When antibiotics are NOT needed:

- You have an infection caused by a virus (such as a cold, bronchitis, the flu, or most types of diarrhea).
- You don't have an infection but instead have some other medical problem (such as anemia).
- You are not actually sick (except in rare cases where antibiotics have been shown to prevent infection).
- You have decided against them (such as near the end of life).

## Why doctors may give antibiotics when they are NOT needed:

- Doctors are not always sure what is causing an illness and may feel they have to provide treatment right away.
- Some patients and families think they are not getting good care unless they get an antibiotic and insist that they want one.



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**“I got better  
on my own!”**



## What you can do:

- Talk with the doctor about the benefits and harms of antibiotics.
- Take medicine exactly the way the doctor says. Don't skip doses.
- Take care of yourself: get rest, eat and drink enough, and take over-the-counter medicines as needed.
- If you are on hospice or thinking about hospice, talk with your doctor about whether you need antibiotics anymore.

## What not to do:

- Don't ask for an antibiotic when the doctor says it isn't needed.
- Don't take an antibiotic for a virus (cold, cough, or flu).

## How antibiotics can hurt you:

- Antibiotics normally work by killing bacteria. Sometimes not all of the germs are killed, and the strongest ones can grow and spread. A person can get sick again, and this time the germs are harder to kill because the antibiotics no longer work. This is called resistance and makes some infections very hard to control. Resistance can make you sick longer, requiring more doctor visits and drugs that are even stronger. The more often you use an antibiotic, the greater the chance that the germs will become resistant.
- Antibiotics can save lives, but they can cause problems, too. Older people have more side effects, which can cause problems all over the body. In addition to resistance, antibiotics can cause nausea, dizziness, diarrhea, rash, kidney damage, and allergic reactions.

## Don't Take Antibiotics for Granted

Antibiotics are helpful, but now you know why sometimes you or a family member may not need them. You can help yourself and others by taking antibiotics only when they are needed.

Resources for you:

CDC: [www.cdc.gov/getsmart/](http://www.cdc.gov/getsmart/)

FDA: <http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/UCM078484>

AHRQ: <http://www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers/index.html>

