



Using antibiotics wisely

Antibiotics are drugs that help the body fight certain infections. The good news is that since their discovery in the 1940s, they have considerably reduced the number of deaths from infectious diseases. The bad news is that almost half of the prescriptions that are written for antibiotics today are unnecessary.

Part of the problem is that many people believe that antibiotics will cure all sicknesses, and therefore they ask their doctor for them whenever they become ill. In reality, antibiotics will only fight infections caused by bacteria. These include some types of pneumonia and meningitis as well as cystitis (an infection of the urinary bladder).

Antibiotics will not work on infections caused by viruses, such as the common cold and the flu. These infections generally cause telltale symptoms such as runny nose, aches, cough, and fever. They can be controlled with over-the-counter decongestants and pain relievers until the body fights off the infection.

Using antibiotics inappropriately leads to a condition called antibiotic resistance. Taking too many antibiotics or not using them as directed allows bacteria to rewire their genetic material so that the next time they come into contact with an antibiotic, the drug will not be able to kill the bacteria. As a result, a more powerful and expensive drug with potentially more side effects will need to be used to kill the bacteria. The ultimate concern is that some types of bacteria will become so resistant that no antibiotic will be able to kill them.

To combat the growing problem of antibiotic resistance:

- Do not insist that your doctor prescribe an antibiotic. Your doctor will prescribe you one only if he or she determines that your illness is caused by bacteria and that the infection is serious enough to warrant drug therapy. In some instances, the body will be able to fight the bacteria on its own.
- When you are prescribed an antibiotic, take it exactly as directed by your physician. This means that you should take all of the pills. Do not stop taking them once you feel better. Do not keep some for future use.
- Never take an antibiotic that was prescribed for someone else, even if it was for a family member.

To avoid infections—and the need for antibiotics:

- Wash your hands after using the bathroom and after coming into contact with a sick person
- Do not eat raw eggs or undercooked meats
- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly
- Make sure your immunizations (and those of your children) are up to date.