

Antibiotics

This leaflet aims to help you understand why you have been prescribed antibiotics and answer any questions you may have. Please also read the patient information that accompanies your antibiotic medication.

What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are used to treat infections caused by bacteria. They work by either killing bacteria or preventing them from reproducing and spreading. Different types of antibiotics are used to treat different types of infection.

When should antibiotics be used?

Antibiotics are only effective against infections caused by bacteria. Many mild bacterial infections also get better on their own without using antibiotics.

Antibiotics may be used to treat bacterial infections that:

- Are unlikely to clear up without antibiotics
- Could infect others unless treated
- Could take too long to clear up without treatment
- Carry a risk of more serious complications

People at a high risk of infection may also be given antibiotics as a precaution. This treatment is called antibiotic prophylaxis. **Antibiotics do not work against infections caused by viruses** such as common colds, flu, most coughs or sore throats.

Antibiotics will not directly help reduce fevers – you may need to take paracetamol and /or ibuprofen for this.

How should I take my antibiotics?

Take antibiotics as directed on the packet or the patient information leaflet that comes with the medication (or as instructed by your clinician).

It is essential to finish taking the full prescribed course of antibiotics, even if you feel better, unless a healthcare professional tells you otherwise. If you stop taking an antibiotic partway through a course, the bacteria can become resistant to the infection.

It is important to space the doses of antibiotic evenly throughout the day. It is not necessary to wake up to take them during the night. For example, if you need to take one capsule three times a day, take one at 8am, 3pm and 10pm. Please read the information leaflet that accompanies your medication for advice with regards to food.

What if I miss a dose of antibiotics?

If you forget to take a dose of your antibiotics, take that dose as soon as you remember and then continue to take your course of antibiotics as normal.

However if it is almost time for your next dose, skip the missed dose and continue with your regular dosing schedule. Don't take a double dose to make up for the missed one.

What if I accidentally take an extra dose?

Accidentally taking one extra dose of your antibiotic is unlikely to cause you any serious harm. However it will increase your chances of experiencing side effects, such as pain in your stomach, diarrhoea and feeling or being sick.

If you accidentally take more than one extra dose of your antibiotic, are worried or experiencing severe side effect, speak to your GP or call NHS 111 as soon as possible.

What are the side effects of antibiotics?

As with any medication, antibiotics can cause side effects. Most antibiotics don't cause problems if they are used properly and serious side effects are rare. Common side effects include:

- Being sick.
- Feeling sick.
- Bloating or indigestion.
- Diarrhoea – if diarrhoea is severe or watery, report this to your GP.

Some people may have an allergic reaction to antibiotics. In very rare cases, people can experience swelling of the face and tongue, and have difficulty breathing. This is called an anaphylactic reaction and is a medical emergency requiring a 999 call.

Other considerations and interactions

- Some antibiotics aren't suitable for people with certain medical conditions, or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. You should only ever take antibiotics prescribed for you – never take those prescribed for a friend or family member.
- Some antibiotics can also react unpredictably with other medications, such as the oral contraceptive pill, herbal remedies and alcohol. It is important to read the information leaflet that comes with your medication carefully and discuss any concerns with a healthcare professional.
- If you are taking Warfarin you should inform the person taking your blood of the antibiotic you are taking.

Antibiotic resistance – what is it?

Both the NHS and health organisations across the world are trying to reduce the use of antibiotics, especially for conditions that aren't serious.

The overuse of antibiotics in recent years means they're becoming less effective and has led to the emergence of 'super bugs'. Bacteria change rapidly; they adapt and find ways to survive the effects of antibiotics. They can become 'antibiotic resistant' so that the antibiotic no longer works. Antibiotic resistant bacteria are becoming more common. If you take antibiotics when you don't need them, they may lose their ability to kill bacteria. If the bacteria keep 'over-powering' the antibiotics we have, we may exhaust ways to treat infections.

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

K O'Hagan, Lead Advanced Practitioner, Emergency Department, June 2023.

Next review due: June 2025

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