

Antibiotic Resistance Campaign

Myth 1 – Antibiotics are effective against bacterial and viral infections.

First Health Provides Information About the Proper Use of Antibiotics

Unfortunately you know what it feels like to have the flu. It happens to all of us. When you are feeling under the weather, all you want is to get better, and to feel better as soon as possible. At times that may require an antibiotic. But, how do you know when an antibiotic is necessary?

The need for an antibiotic depends on whether your illness is due to a viral or bacterial infection. Antibiotics are needed for infections caused by bacteria, such as strep throat and some forms of sinusitis; they are not useful for a viral infection such as a cough, cold or influenza. Antibiotics attack bacterial germs that cause infections, they have no impact on viral infections.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that people consume 235 million doses of antibiotics annually. It is estimated that 20 to 25% of that use is unnecessary. So it's important to understand when an antibiotic is needed and when it is not.

Misuse and overuse of antibiotics is a major concern. In fact, using an antibiotic when you don't need one can cause harm to your health and contribute to the development of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria. These new, stronger bacteria survive and continue to multiply causing more harm. These bacteria, known as "super bugs," can make illnesses harder to cure and last longer.

Keep in mind that antibiotic use depends on the specific diagnosis. While antibiotics will not cure a viral infection, any infection that is caused by bacteria needs to be treated with an antibiotic. Only your physician can best make that determination. The more you know about your symptoms, the easier it will be to communicate with your doctor. Be sure to convey your symptoms to him/her, as well as how long you have experienced these symptoms.

Understanding the difference between a bacterial and viral infection is one way to decrease antibiotic resistance and manage your health. To learn more about the problem of antibiotic resistance, talk to your doctor and view all the information on the **First Health** Web site.

Sidebar

Viral vs. Bacterial Infections

The most common illnesses in which antibiotics are most commonly misused are listed below. Use this as a guide to understand the reasoning why your doctor may or may not prescribe an antibiotic. The American Academy of Family Physicians provides these guidelines:

- Common colds and flu are caused by viruses. They can't be cured with antibiotics. Symptoms can last two weeks or more and should be allowed to run their course.
- Coughs and bronchitis are almost always caused by viruses. However, if you have a lung condition or the illness lasts a long time, you may have a bacterial infection. Your doctor may decide to treat you with an antibiotic.
- Sore throats are most often caused by viruses. Strep throat is caused by bacteria and requires treatment with antibiotics. Your doctor may request a throat swab and a lab test before he/she will prescribe an antibiotic for a sore throat.
- Sinus infections do not always indicate a bacterial infection. Even if you have a runny nose, or yellow/green mucus, you may not have a bacterial infection. Antibiotics should only be used for severe sinus infections or infections that last more than two weeks.

Talk to your doctor. Your doctor can determine when an antibiotic is needed.