



## Antibiotics: Questions and Answers

### **What is a viral infection?**

A virus is one of the two major infectious agents. Viruses **cannot** be controlled with antibiotics. If your natural defenses are weakened by stress, lack of rest and poor diet, your body may not be able to resist a viral attack. The signs and symptoms of a viral infection may include: fatigue, sore throat, cough, runny nose, watery eyes, nasal congestion, swollen glands, muscle aches, vomiting, diarrhea, and fever. Viral infections such as influenza, colds, and mononucleosis **do not** improve with treatment by penicillin or other antibiotics.

### **What is a bacterial infection?**

Bacteria are the second type of the major infectious agents. Some bacterial infections get better by themselves and do not require treatment. Infections such as bladder infections, sexually transmitted diseases, boils, and ear infections often require treatment with an antibiotic.

### **How do antibiotics work in the body?**

Antibiotics are medicines used in the treatment of infections caused by bacteria. They work by killing bacteria and/or preventing their growth. There are many different types of antibiotics and each can be used to treat a different kind of infection. Your health care provider can best determine if you need an antibiotic and which type is best for you.

### **How do I properly take the antibiotic?**

The antibiotic prescribed by your clinician is for your present infection only. It is very important to follow the directions for the medication prescribed. Antibiotics are generally given for a specified period of time (7-10 days, for example) to be taken at specific intervals (every 4, 6, 8 or 12 hours). This is necessary to keep the right amount of the medication in the bloodstream. Too much of the medication may cause an adverse reaction, too little may not be completely effective. Some drugs have specific instructions for taking them before, after, or during meals. Your clinician and pharmacist can provide you with complete instructions for your particular medication needs.

### **If I feel better after a few days, can I stop taking the medication?**

To clear your infection completely, continue taking the antibiotic for the full time of treatment, even if you begin to feel better after a few days. This is especially important with "strep" infections, since serious heart problems could develop later if your infection is not completely cleared up. Also, if you stop the medication too soon, your symptoms may return.

### **How does the clinician tell the difference between bacterial and viral infections?**

Your clinician will ask several questions about your symptoms, conduct a physical examination, and may order special blood tests or cultures to fully evaluate your condition. Based on the physical findings and/or the results of tests, your clinician can determine what type of infection is present and how to treat it.

### **What should I do if I miss a dose of the antibiotic?**

If you miss a dose of the antibiotic, take it as soon as possible. Then go back to your regular dosing schedule. However, don't double up doses.

### **What should I do if the medication makes me ill, causes diarrhea or upset stomach, and I want to stop taking it?**

You should always notify your health care provider as soon as possible if the medication prescribed makes you ill or if you feel you want to stop taking it for some reason.

### **Can I take my old prescription or borrow my friend's antibiotic?**

You should never begin any medication until you are evaluated by a provider. If you took all the medication as directed previously you should not have any left over medications to take. Your old prescription or one borrowed from a friend may not be appropriate for your current problem. Your friend's medication may also cause allergic reactions when mixed with other medications. It is very important to tell your provider every medication you are taking, including over-the-counter and herbal.

## **Taking an old prescription or the antibiotic of a friend can falsify test results and complicate your treatment**

An old prescription may suppress the bacteria enough not to show up on the test that the provider orders, thus giving a false test result. This can delay appropriate treatment and you may have to be seen again when your symptoms have returned.

## **When should I see the health care provider again?**

Your clinician should discuss with you the plans for follow-up visits if they are needed. Appointments can be made in-person or by calling the Dial-A-Nurse line at 333-2700. Seek professional help if your symptoms worsen, if you feel you have not improved after completing all of the medication, or if you have unusual reactions or side effects.

## **Can I drink alcohol when on an antibiotic?**

Alcohol is a drug and in combination with other drugs including antibiotics, can cause an interaction with undesirable results. Ask your clinician about your specific medication, but in general, you should avoid combining alcohol with any medication.

## **What should I do if I take birth control pills or another medication?**

**Always** inform your clinician of all medications you are taking, including birth control pills, over-the-counter drugs, and herbal supplements. Drugs sometimes interact with each other so that the combined effect may be very different from the intended effect. Some antibiotics decrease the effectiveness of the birth control pill, and an unplanned pregnancy may occur. During the time you are taking an antibiotic and for the following week consider using condoms and spermicidal jelly, which are available at no cost from:

Health Resource Center at McKinley Health Center  
Main Lobby, Information/HRC counter  
333-6000

Health Resource Center at the Illini Union  
Illini Union, OASIS, Room 40, lower level  
244-5994

## **Medication use consumer self-help list**

**When any medication is prescribed, don't be passive. Always ask your provider:**

- The name of the medication and what it is supposed to do.
- Exactly how and when the medication should be taken (before or after meals, and for how long?).
- Does it have any side effects?
- Are there any conditions under which the medication should not be taken?
- Can any other medication be taken at the same time? Inform the clinician of all regular medicines taken (with or without a prescription) and any unusual or allergic reaction you've had to any drug.
- Should the prescription be refilled if the condition persists?
- Can the medication be prescribed by its generic name if there is no reason for choosing a specific brand? (This is often less costly.) Most of the antibiotics prescribed at McKinley will be in a generic form, that is in Tier 1 (lowest co-pay).

## **Always remember**

- Don't take drugs prescribed for someone else. Don't give yours to anyone else.
- Don't drink alcoholic beverages when you are taking any drug.
- Keep medicines safely out of the reach of children.
- Store medicine in a cool, dry place away from bright light.
- Store your medicine in its original container.
- Do not remove the label, since directions for use and other special information appear there.
- Always read the label before taking any medication, and note the expiration date. Do not take medication in the dark.
- Discard outdated or unused drugs.
- Before having surgery or dental work, inform your provider or dentist about all medication you are taking.
- Carry information in your wallet about any medications you take, any drug allergies or chronic illnesses.

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: **Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700**

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: <http://www.mckinley.uiuc.edu>