



Antibiotics (Antimicrobials) and older people – what you should know

A resource for older people, their families and carers.

What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are important medicines that we rely on to treat infections caused by bacteria (e.g. pneumonia). Bacterial infections can be very serious in older people. Antibiotics are part of a larger group of medicines called antimicrobials, which are used to treat a range of infections. Other antimicrobials can be used to treat infections caused by viruses (e.g. flu), fungi (e.g. thrush) or parasites (e.g. threadworm or scabies).

Sometimes antibiotics are prescribed when they are not needed. Using antimicrobials when we don't need them is a risk to our health and contributes to the problem of antimicrobial resistance.

What is antibiotic (antimicrobial) resistance?

When you take antimicrobials, they kill the germs (the bacteria, virus, fungus or parasite) causing your sickness, but they also kill some of the germs that you carry in your body that keep you healthy.

Overuse increases the chance of some germs becoming resistant, which means when you next need antimicrobials they may no longer work to treat your infection.

This is important, because if you get an infection caused by resistant germs it can be difficult or even impossible to treat. You might require a long stay in hospital, alternative antimicrobials that have more side effects or injections rather than oral antimicrobials. Resistant germs can multiply and spread to other people you have contact with, then these people can also develop antimicrobial-resistant infections.



Why is antimicrobial resistance a concern for older people?

If older people 'catch' antimicrobial-resistant germs, they could get very sick or even die because the first antimicrobial they receive doesn't work. Older people are especially vulnerable because they:

- Are more likely to have poor health or a weaker immune system
- May have frequent hospital admissions which expose them to other germs
- May have devices, such as indwelling catheters, that can give germs direct access into the body
- May live where they are close to other people, such as an aged care home.

Smart use of antimicrobials helps keep us healthy, stops antimicrobial resistance, and ensures that these life-saving medicines are available for future generations.

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If you have an infection and your doctor is considering antimicrobials, ask:

- Why am I taking this medicine?
- Will I get better without this medicine?
- What are the risks of taking this medicine?
- Will this medicine interact with my other medications?
- How should I take this medicine (e.g. before food) and for how long?
- How will I know the medicine is working and what should I do if I don't improve?
- Is there anything else I can do to help? e.g. rest, paracetamol

Many infections
get better without
antimicrobials.



Tips to reduce antimicrobial-resistant infections

- ✓ Ask what you can do to feel better and treat your symptoms without antibiotics. Infections caused by viruses don't need antibiotics.
- ✓ Talk with your doctor if you have any questions about your antimicrobials, or if you develop any side effects.



Tips to stay healthy

Healthy habits can protect you from infections and help stop antimicrobial-resistant germs from spreading to and from others.

- ✓ Wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub often.
- ✓ Ask others to wash their hands before touching you and especially when caring for any wounds or catheters you may have.
- ✓ Ask carers, family or friends not to visit when they don't feel well.
- ✓ Get recommended vaccines, such as the flu, pneumococcal (pneumonia) and COVID-19 vaccines.
- ✓ Take good care of yourself if you have a chronic condition, like diabetes.
- ✓ Covering your cough to prevent the spread of germs.



Family members and carers can support an older person by:

- Communicating with your loved one's doctors, healthcare workers and carers
- Helping your loved one understand why medicines are being prescribed, how long they should be taken for, and the risks and benefits
- Making sure you know what your loved one's wishes are should they become unwell.



Using antimicrobials when they are not needed can do more harm than good

- Side effects of antimicrobials can be a rash, nausea, diarrhoea, or fungal infections (e.g. thrush) and older people can be more prone. More serious side effects include *Clostridioides difficile* infection (also called *C. difficile* or *C. diff*), a germ which causes diarrhoea that can lead to severe bowel damage and even death
- Life-threatening allergic reactions can also occur, which can be more severe in older people
- Older people may also be taking other medicines that can interact with antimicrobials.