

Do I really need antibiotics?



Antibiotics can kill the harmful bacteria that make you sick.

Antibiotics can also kill the good bacteria that keep you healthy. Without these good bacteria, other types of bacteria can grow and can cause infections.

Antibiotics are part of a larger group of medicines called antimicrobials.

Antibiotics only work for some infections. They work against bacteria but don't treat infections caused by viruses such as:

- Colds and flu (influenza) and COVID-19 (coronavirus)
- Bronchitis and most coughs
- Most sore throats and ear infections.

Think twice before taking an antibiotic

Many infections, even some caused by bacteria, get better without antibiotics. Taking an antibiotic when you don't need it won't make you feel better or recover sooner. It can increase your chance of side effects like nausea and diarrhoea.

When you feel better after taking antibiotics that aren't needed, it's because your immune system is doing the work to fight your infection.

Coloured mucus isn't a sign of bacterial infection. It is a sign that your immune system is working to fight your infection.

What are antibiotic-resistant infections?

Taking an antibiotic when it is not needed, or for longer than you should, can cause bacteria to develop resistance to antibiotics. If these bacteria later cause infections that need to be treated, the antibiotic will not work properly.

Infections that can't be treated with certain antibiotics are called 'antibiotic-resistant'.

Antibiotic-resistant bacteria can spread from person-to-person. You can be affected by resistant bacteria even without taking antibiotics.

Why is antibiotic resistance a problem?

Hundreds of people in Australia die from antibiotic-resistant infections each year.

Antibiotic resistance is a problem throughout the world and is a major threat to human health. Australians use a large amount of antibiotics – more than many other similar countries with advanced health care. The more antibiotics are used, the more likely antibiotic resistance will develop.

Infections caused by antibiotic-resistant bacteria can:

- Last longer
- Have more complications and
- Be more likely to spread to others.

Some procedures, such as surgery, can sometimes lead to infections. Antibiotic resistance makes these procedures more risky, because the infection may be harder to treat.

Because of antibiotic resistance, even simple infections may need treatment in hospital with intravenous (IV) antibiotics. In the past, these infections could have been treated at home with antibiotics taken by mouth, such as tablets, capsules or liquids.

Antibiotic use in infants and children may also lead to a higher risk of chronic (long-term) disease as an adult.

In Australia, some bacterial infections now have no effective antibiotic treatment. Discoveries of new antibiotics are rare, so it's important that the current antibiotics are effective.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Antibiotics won't help you get better if you have a cold, flu or other viral infection.
- Antibiotic resistance can stop antibiotics working to treat infections.
- Many infections get better without antibiotics.
- Talk to your doctor to find out if you really need antibiotics.

Questions to ask your doctor

- Do we need to test the cause of my infection?
- How long should my recovery take?
- What are the risks and benefits of me taking antibiotics?
- Will the antibiotic affect my regular medicines?
- How should I take the antibiotic (how often, for how long, and with or without food or other medicines)?

What you can do

- Return leftover antibiotics to a pharmacy for safe disposal.
- Never take leftover antibiotics or give them to anyone else, because the antibiotic you were prescribed might not treat other infections.
- Don't keep prescription repeats for antibiotics 'in case' you become sick again. Talk to your doctor each time.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist what you can do to feel better and ease your symptoms.

More information: [safetyandquality.gov.au/about-antibiotics](https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/about-antibiotics)

