

Antibiotic use in colds and flu

The Health Column

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Colds and flu are caused by viruses. Viruses are a type of tiny organism that can cause illness. When you have a cold, you may sneeze and have a blocked or runny nose, a sore throat and a cough. Colds rarely cause serious harm, but they can still make you feel unwell. Colds usually get better in 7–10 days, but the cough can last up to three weeks. Influenza, commonly known as ‘the flu’, is different to a cold although both are caused by viruses. Flu symptoms usually start suddenly with a high fever and you may feel unwell and need to rest. You may have a dry cough, shivering, sweating and severe muscle aches.



Antibiotics are medicines used to treat diseases and infections caused by bacteria. Bacterial infections can affect the throat, lungs, skin, bowel, and many other parts of the body. While some infections are severe, many are mild. These diseases can be treated with antibiotics. Antibiotics interfere with the vital processes in bacteria, killing the bacteria or stopping them from multiplying. However, they do not work against viruses. Therefore, not all illness and disease can be treated with an antibiotic.

People who have a cold or the flu may think that antibiotics will help them get better faster. This is not true. Antibiotics do not kill viruses so will have no effect on viruses such as those causing colds or the flu. If you are normally healthy and well, your body can usually clear the viral infection causing the cold or flu by itself. Antibiotics will not help people get over a cold or flu faster, they won't stop the infection from getting worse, and won't prevent the infection being passed onto other people. In some cases, antibiotics may cause side effects such as diarrhoea, stomach upsets, thrush or allergic reactions. The yearly flu vaccination is recommended for people who are at risk of serious complications. However, the flu vaccine will not prevent someone from getting colds, as these are caused by different viruses.

If you use antibiotics when you don't need to, such as treating colds and flu, it could make the antibiotic less effective when they are needed. This is called antibiotic resistance. When bacteria become antibiotic resistant, the antibiotic will no longer work against that infection. This can make infections caused by antibiotic-resistant bacteria difficult to treat, last for a long time and spread to other people. According to the World Health Organization, antibiotic resistance is the third biggest threat to human health. Therefore, it is very important to only use antibiotics when appropriate. Do not expect doctors to prescribe antibiotics for viral illnesses such as colds and flu. This will encourage the development of antibiotic resistant bacteria.

Certain people may be more likely to develop complications from respiratory tract infections. Complications are often bacterial infections that need antibiotics. People with chronic conditions (e.g. asthma, diabetes, immune problems) are also more likely to need an antibiotic to treat respiratory tract infections.

There are illnesses that need to be treated with antibiotics. Pneumonia is a serious lung infection that can be caused by bacteria. Antibiotics will be prescribed if pneumonia is caused by bacteria. World Pneumonia Day is on 12 November and it aims to raise awareness about pneumonia, promote interventions to protect against, prevent and treat pneumonia, and generate action to combat the illness.

If you have a cold or the flu, speak with your local pharmacist. Pharmacists are medicines experts. Your pharmacist can give you detailed information about colds and flu and suggest treatment options. Self Care Fact Cards about *Colds and flu*, *Coughs* and *Antibiotics* are available from those pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information. Other Self Care Fact Cards that are relevant to your individual situation may also be available – ask your pharmacist. NPS MedicineWise is a helpful consumer website that has information about colds and flu, antibiotics and antibiotic resistance, and bacteria. NPS MedicineWise can be found at www.nps.org.au.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au/selfcare, then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.