

What You Need to Know When You Are Prescribed an Antibiotic

Your healthcare team has prescribed antibiotics for you because they think you may have an infection, or another condition which requires antibiotics. Some infections can be treated with antibiotics, which are powerful medications that kill bacteria and can save lives. Like all medications, antibiotics have side effects and should only be used when necessary. Your doctor thinks the benefits of antibiotics outweigh the potential risks at this time.

What are some questions to ask my doctor about antibiotics?

As a patient or caregiver, it is important to understand your or your loved one's antibiotic treatment. Here are some important questions to ask your healthcare team if you haven't already been told the answers:

- What infection or condition is this antibiotic treating and how do you know I have that infection or condition?
- What side effects might occur from this antibiotic?
- How long will I need to take this antibiotic?
- Is it safe to take this antibiotic with other medications or supplements (e.g., vitamins) that I am taking?
- Are there any special directions I need to know about taking this antibiotic? For example, should I take it with food?
- How will I be monitored to know whether my infection or condition is responding to the antibiotic?

Will I have side effects from my antibiotic?

You might. One of the most common side effects of nearly all antibiotics is diarrhea. Usually this is not severe, but occasionally diarrhea can be caused by

a bacteria called *Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile*, often shortened to “*C. diff*”). This occurs because antibiotics destroy some of the normal, helpful bacteria in the gut. This allows the *C. difficile* to take over, and puts patients at high risk for this serious infection.

Another common side effect of antibiotics is an allergic reaction. A rash is most common, but some reactions can be more serious. Not all rashes are allergies, though, so it is important to discuss with your doctor if this occurs. The most serious reactions include hives (itchy red patches with pale swelling on top), lip, tongue or throat swelling, wheezing or difficulty breathing, or vomiting.

When should I call my doctor?

Most diarrhea caused by antibiotics is not infectious and should not cause concern. You should let your healthcare team know **right away** if you **develop watery stool three times or more per day** while taking an antibiotic, because that may be a sign of a *C. difficile* infection. Diarrhea caused by *C. difficile* can be serious and must be treated quickly. The risk of getting *C. difficile* diarrhea is highest during the first month, but it can last for up to three months after you stop taking antibiotics. Let your healthcare team know if you develop diarrhea even after you stop taking an antibiotic.

Call your doctor if you develop a rash or other sign of a reaction while taking an antibiotic.

Call 911 to get help immediately if you:

- develop lip, tongue or throat swelling
- are wheezing or have difficulty breathing

Remember, antibiotics are life-saving drugs and they need to be used properly. It is important to take your antibiotics exactly as prescribed. If you have any questions about your antibiotics, please talk to your healthcare team.

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Adapted from CDC. *You've Been Prescribed an Antibiotic Now What?* Access at: https://www.cdc.gov/getsmart/healthcare/pdfs/16_265926_antibioticfactsheet_v7_508-final.pdf

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